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ANDY McNAMARA
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Games Make The World Better

When a new little portable gaming system called Playdate appeared in my timeline, I was a little bewildered but also instantly drawn to its quirky sales pitch. It features time-released, black-and-white games, and ... get this .... one of its major selling points is it has an analog crank. It will ship in 2020 and cost $149. I know what you are thinking – that sounds like complete nonsense.

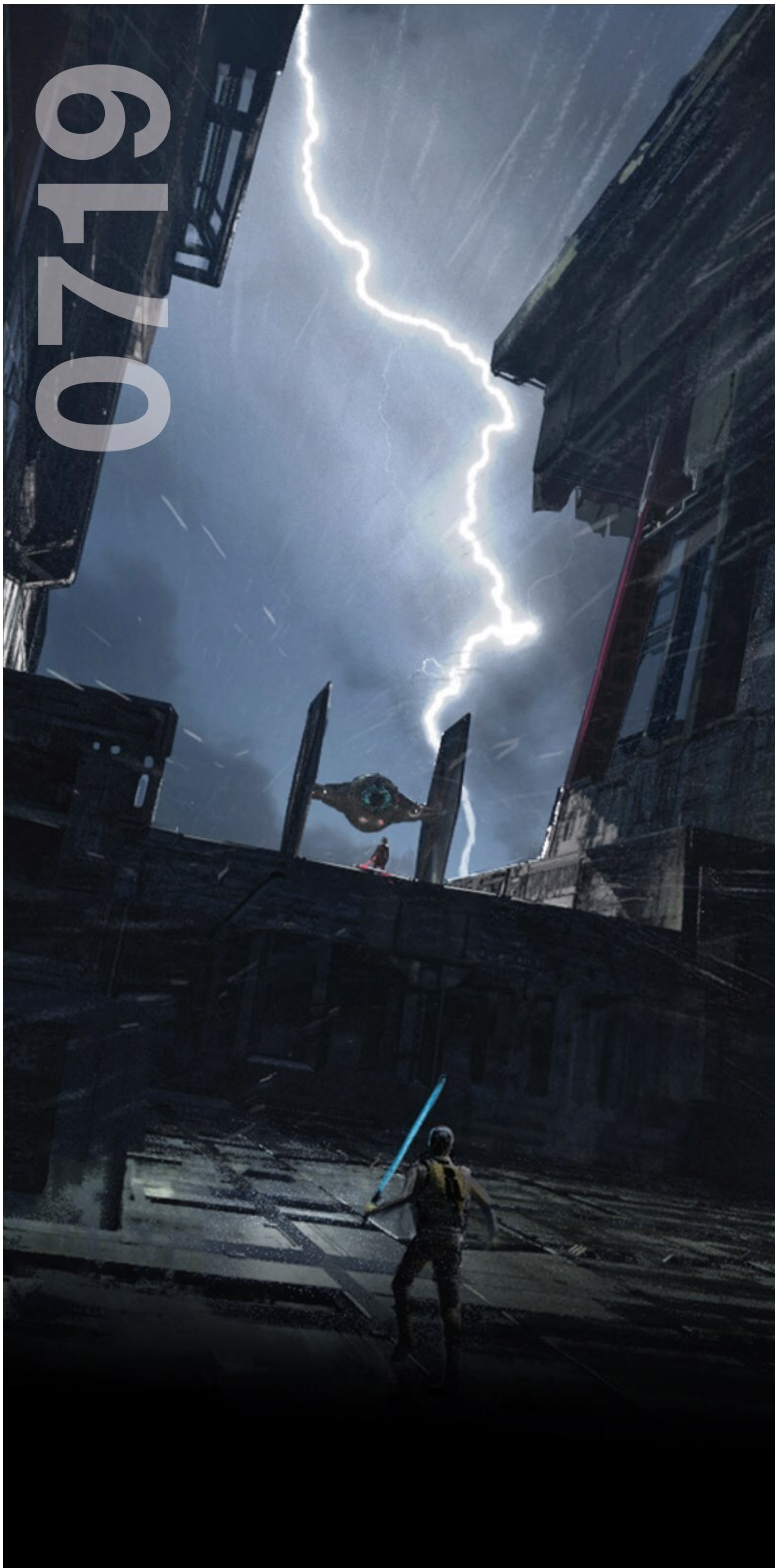
I don't think I can argue that point, nor do I want to. It does sound like nonsense. But it reminds me that games are supposed to be nonsense. Games are supposed to be fun.

We live in an esports world right now. So many elements in games are measured and compared against our peers. Do I have the greatest drop? The newest skin? What is my rank and how do I improve? Nothing against all that, I love that competitive spirit too, but something about Playdate screams to me. The games are time released. You get 12 games, one a week, featuring work by famed designers like Keita Takahashi (Katamari Damacy) and Zach Gage (SpellTower) to name a couple. Time-released games? Played on a crank? What is this madness?

Now to be fair, this whole thing could be garbage. But this little yellow box with a crank is a great reminder that we play games for enjoyment and wonder. Seeing things we have never seen, and challenging ourselves along the way. So next time you find yourself arguing over which game is better, or that your friend has bad taste because they love some game you hate, remember games are here to make our lives better. I, too, get wrapped up in all the competition, but Playdate reminded me, in its absurdity, that not everything needs to be measured against the past and the future. We can just enjoy things for what they are.

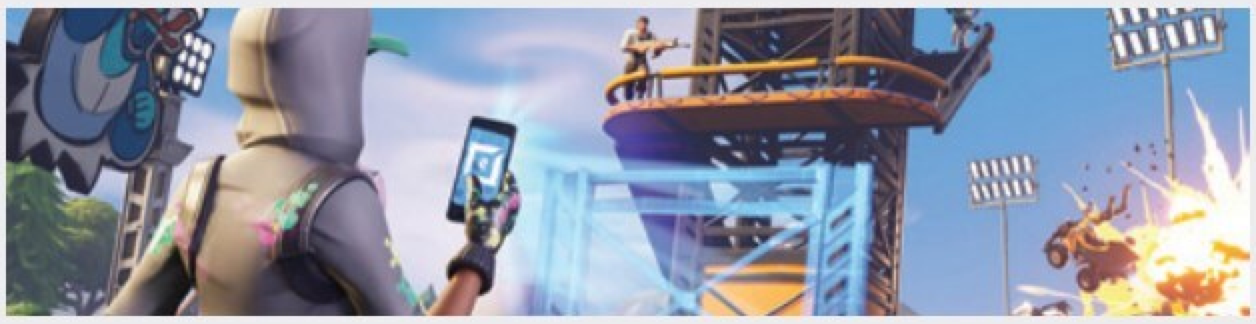
Thanks for reading and I hope you find something you love in this issue.

Cheers,



32 Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order

The creators of Titanfall and the director behind God of War III are teaming up to potentially give Star Wars the video game adaptation it has always deserved. We visited the studio to find out where this canonical story is heading, get hands-on with lightsaber combat, and explore its surprisingly dense worlds. ***by Andrew Reiner***



10 The Tangled Web Of Video Game Addiction
The conversation around video game addiction has continued to heat up. We talked to various researchers and psychological experts to discover what is currently known about this complex issue.

20 Gamer: Mythical Treasures
We spoke with the biggest God of War fan in the world and learned about their collection.

30 Hardware Review: Oculus Quest
The Oculus Quest is the best VR has ever been thanks to easy setup and no wires.

46 Darksiders: Genesis
Darksiders returns to its original artist, Joe Madureira, for something interesting that isn't Darksiders 4.

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Rockstar talks about what's next for the Wild West.

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The popular shooter franchise returns with a new engine and, yes, a new campaign.

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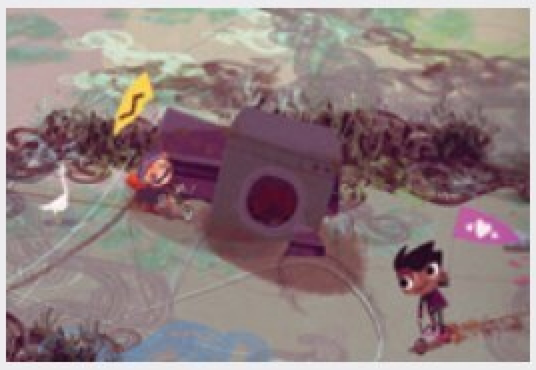
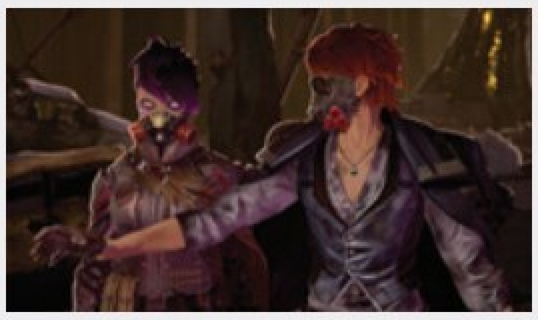
Ghost Recon is exploring a fictional island for the first time in its Wildlands follow-up.



66 Knights And Bikes

Double Fine's imagination-fueled adventure is showing lots of promise.



68 Code Vein

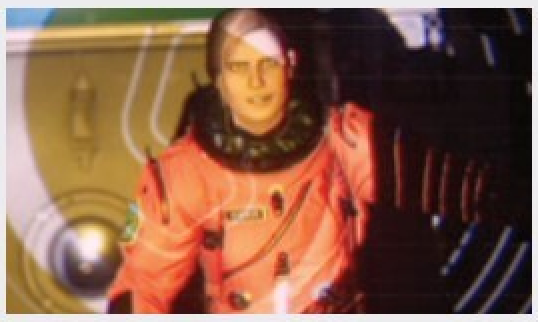
We went hands-on with the game that takes inspiration from Dark Souls and anime.

69 Madden NFL 20

It's nearly time for more football! And EA has some surprising changes for this entry.

71 Oddworld: Soulstorm

Oddworld is getting its first true successor in many, many years.



82 Observation

We've explored derelict space stations before, but have you ever been the derelict space station?

83 Rage 2

The Rage sequel's gunplay is great, but the rest of the game falls short.

85 Shakedown Hawaii

This Retro City Rampage sort-of-sequel outdoes the original's action and humor.

90 Dreams

Media Molecule's game/game engine hybrid is in the wild and we've explored its enchanting world of possibilities.

86 A Plague Tale: Innocence

How often do games let you explore the 1300s while avoiding the threat of the black plague?

90 Total War: Three Kingdoms

Three Kingdoms gives the Total War series a fantastical edge, and it works well.

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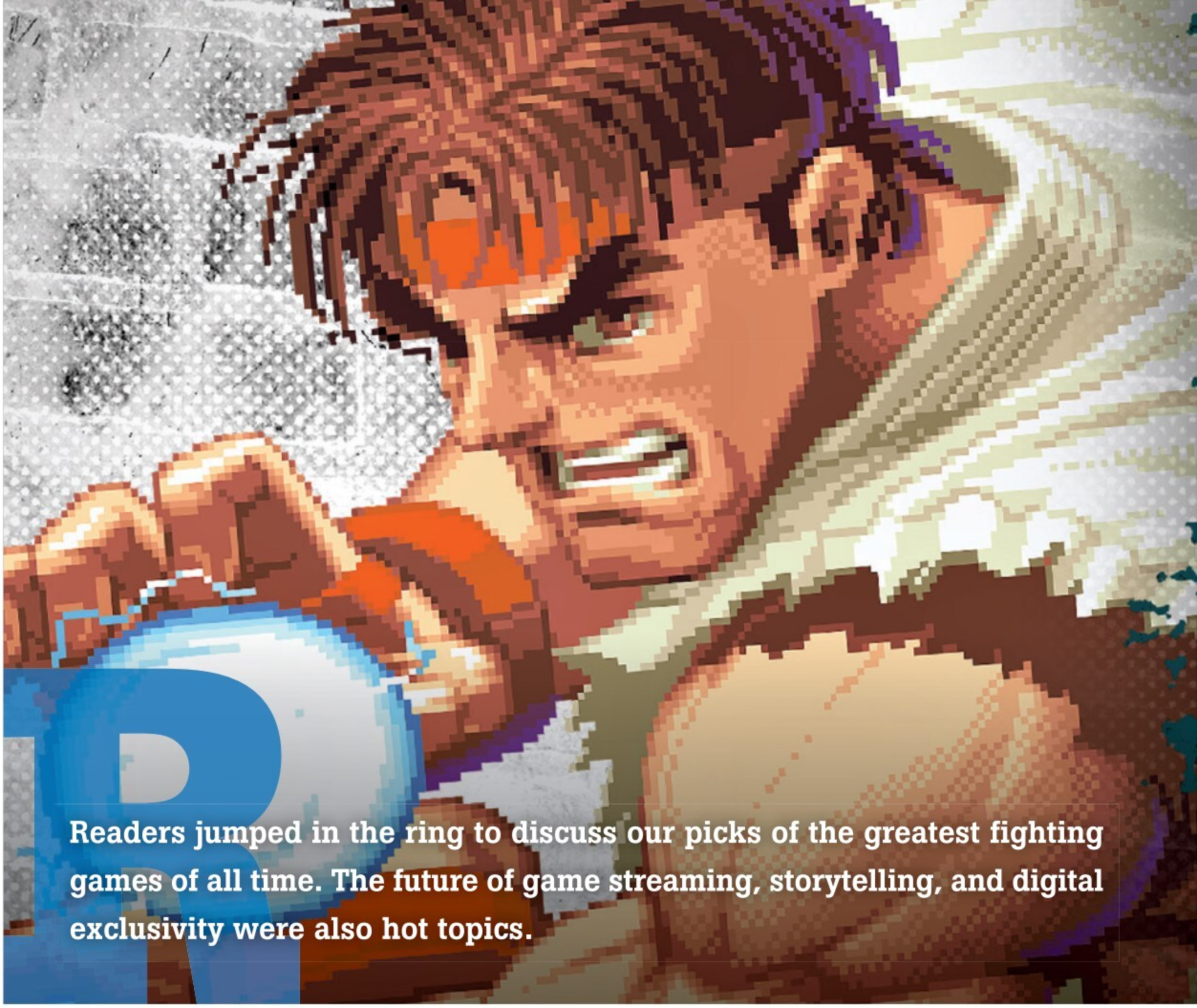


Readers jumped in the ring to discuss our picks of the greatest fighting games of all time. The future of game streaming, storytelling, and digital exclusivity were also hot topics.

Full Spectrum Warriors

After reading your Greatest Fighting Games Of All Time list (issue 313), I must say I agree with 29 out of your 30 picks. Bushido Blade should not have been on this list. I would have put X-Men: Mutant Academy 2 in that spot instead. I remember my local game store being sold out for weeks after its release, and to me it's still great after all this time.

Mike Decker
via email

I really enjoyed your best fighting games list, but I felt like I got hit by a Bryan Fury kick when I saw that Tekken Tag Tournament and Street Fighter II for Super Nintendo didn't make the list.

Shane Detert
Mishawaka, IN

Ugh, an entire issue dedicated to fighting games. The worst genre in existence. So sayeth this old man and his diminished reflexes.

Derek Klemetsen
via email

As with all lists, our readers responded with praise, problems, and their own substitute picks. Some quick notes: Tekken Tag Tournament was one spot away from making the list, our Super Street Fighter II Turbo (#3) pick covers all SF II iterations, and it's totally okay that one of us is wrong about Bushido Blade.

Reggie Rejoice

After seeing the news that Reggie Fils-Aimé is retiring, I want to make a kinda weird request. I think in one of your future issues you should make a page dedicated to Reggie. You know, have quotes, fan art, that kind of stuff. Also you could get a drawing of Reggie in the form of a god, like the way the Bloodshot gang worships Marcus in Borderlands 2. I think it would be a fun tribute to the man, the myth, the legend, Reggie.

Aidan Munns
via email

Reggie served as a friendly, cheerful face for Nintendo for over a decade, so we understand why his fanbase will miss him. However, we're not really into deifying corporate presidents. We're sure you can find plenty of weird stuff like that online.

Contact Us

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!

Accepting Exclusivity

Not too long ago, Obsidian announced the PC version of The Outer Worlds would exclusively launch on the Epic Games Store and Microsoft Store. This has angered the many PC gamers who prefer Steam instead. While it doesn't affect console gamers like me, I still sympathize with them. However, I think people are overreacting by hating on the game now. It's alright to feel angry at Obsidian, but the exclusivity won't affect the overall quality of the game. Don't turn up your nose at The Outer Worlds just because it's going to be sold by the same company that makes Fortnite.

James Barker
via email

We'll do you one better, James: Don't be mad at Obsidian either! While having to download and launch a game from a different client is a mild nuisance, it's worth noting the substantially better deal Obsidian gets out of its exclusivity. Not only does Epic take a far smaller share of the game's revenue than Valve, the company also offers additional funding and services to its partnered developers that Steam does not. These benefits could make or break an independent developer (like Obsidian was before being acquired by Microsoft), so rather than boycotting or review bombing, maybe PC gamers can show their support by tolerating a few extra mouse clicks?

Mother Approved

I just saw the Feedback letter criticizing your article on inspiring women in the gaming industry (Her Stories, issue 311). I, for one, would like to thank you for that article. I'm a 40-year-old mother of three kids, two of which are female. Everyone in our family is a gamer, and I've been playing since my hand-me-down Commodore 64 in the '80s. When I was in 7th grade, we had a very basic computer class, and writing lines of code and seeing my little adventure game play out was so exciting. Sadly, that was all the exposure I had to programming, as girls were generally encouraged toward home economics and "less masculine" hobbies. Reading those stories in your article made me wistful I was never offered more programming opportunies, nor encouraged to pursue them. One of my daughters has now mentioned she would like to learn how to code, and you can bet I encourage her to follow that interest. The women you highlighted pushed through stereotypes to pursue their dreams, despite society's expectations. It's great to encourage others to follow suit.

Denise Nachtigal
via email

We still don't get how highlighting the overlooked contributions of pioneering women in the games industry was controversial in the first place, but we're glad you found the article inspirational, Denise. If you're looking for an easy entry point into game development for you and your family, check out our review of Dreams on page 88.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"Does issue 313 have Mortal Kombat info, or is it only Raiden on the cover?"

Quite a lot, actually.

"Would you guys rather play a new Kid Icarus game or a remake of the other three?"

Mark us down for an eggplant-only spinoff.

"Do you think Sony will finally go back to talking about the Vita this E3?"

Considering Sony's not attending E3, probably not.

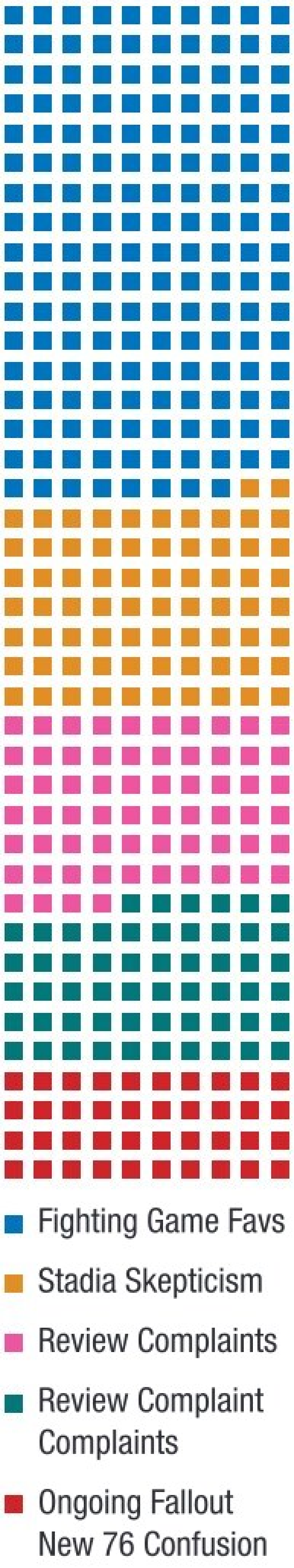
Question Of The Month:

What game genre deserves more love than it gets?

gi spy

(Left) This month we visited Respawn Entertainment, where the Star Wars team gave us the full rundown on Jedi: Fallen Order. **(Right)** Kyle visited Airship Syndicate this month to learn all about Darksiders: Genesis. He was clearly in over his head.

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY



Fight!

In issue 314, we asked readers what their favorite fighting game is. We won't quarrel with these picks!

My all-time favorite fighting game has to be Street Fighter II for the SNES. It was the first fighting game I'd ever played and still sticks with me 21 years later, from Ryu's hadouken to M. Bison's psycho crusher. I still pull out the old SNES once in a while to throw down with my favorite opponents.

Anthony Herrera

Like many others, my pick is Super Smash Brothers Ultimate! The fast-paced action, vast array of characters, and ability to sit down and have an incredibly fun time with family and friends is what I find ideal in a fighting game. Also Joker from Persona 5 was just added, which pretty much solidifies it as my number one!

Aidan Tompkins

My favorite fighting game was fighting with my siblings over whose turn it was to play Crash Bandicoot: Warped. That counts, right?

Caleb McKinnon

Streaming Skepticism

Your article about Google's upcoming streaming platform (Google's Gaming Gambit, issue 313) contained a lot of good information, but it overlooked one key issue: Google's tendency to have a "squirrel!" moment after a project is released. Google creates and executes these awesome projects such as Hangouts, Voice, and Google+, and then tosses them aside for the next "big idea." Many of their projects could be successful if they were constantly being improved and promoted. Instead, Google loses interest and moves on before they can gain recognition and popularity. Stadia is another great idea from Google, but can they be trusted to follow through with it in the years to come?

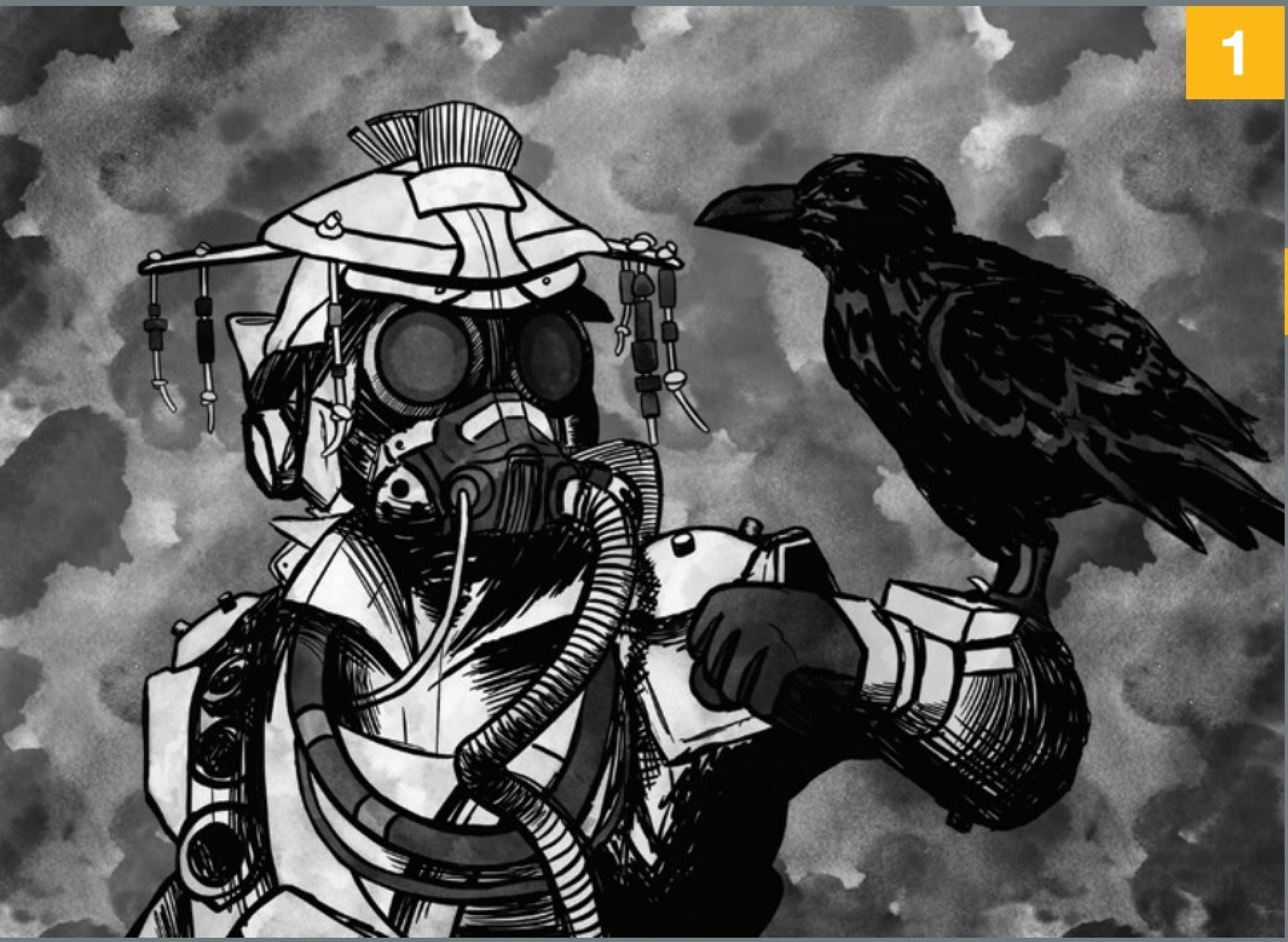
Nik Huckaby
via email

With streaming platforms like Google Stadia on the horizon, the future of gaming is super exciting. Being able to access my games anywhere with no load times sounds great. However, it's also a little scary. While services like Netflix and Hulu have been good overall, look at what happened to music; we went from buying CDs to downloading digital files and now subscription services like Spotify and Apple Music, which give consumers no reason to purchase music anymore. Could the same thing happen in the games industry?

Greg
Houston, TX

Many questions still loom over the potential of game streaming platforms like Stadia, not the least of which include gameplay lag and widespread access to high-speed internet. How those issues shake out – and the level of Google's commitment to Stadia – will only be answered with time.

(Left) Famed comic book artist Joe Madureira signed (and drew a picture of Death!) on our Darksiders 2 issue for our 24-hour Extra Life charity auction later this year. **(Right)** Kim discovered Man of Medan's biggest secret: Everyone at Supermassive is super nice!



WINNER

1 McKenzie Myers

Bloodhound's cool factor really takes a hit when you realize their helmet is actually just a wind chime.

2 Sean McKelvey

For years we've warned people Nintendo's consoles would one day become sentient and kill us all, but sadly no one ever listened.

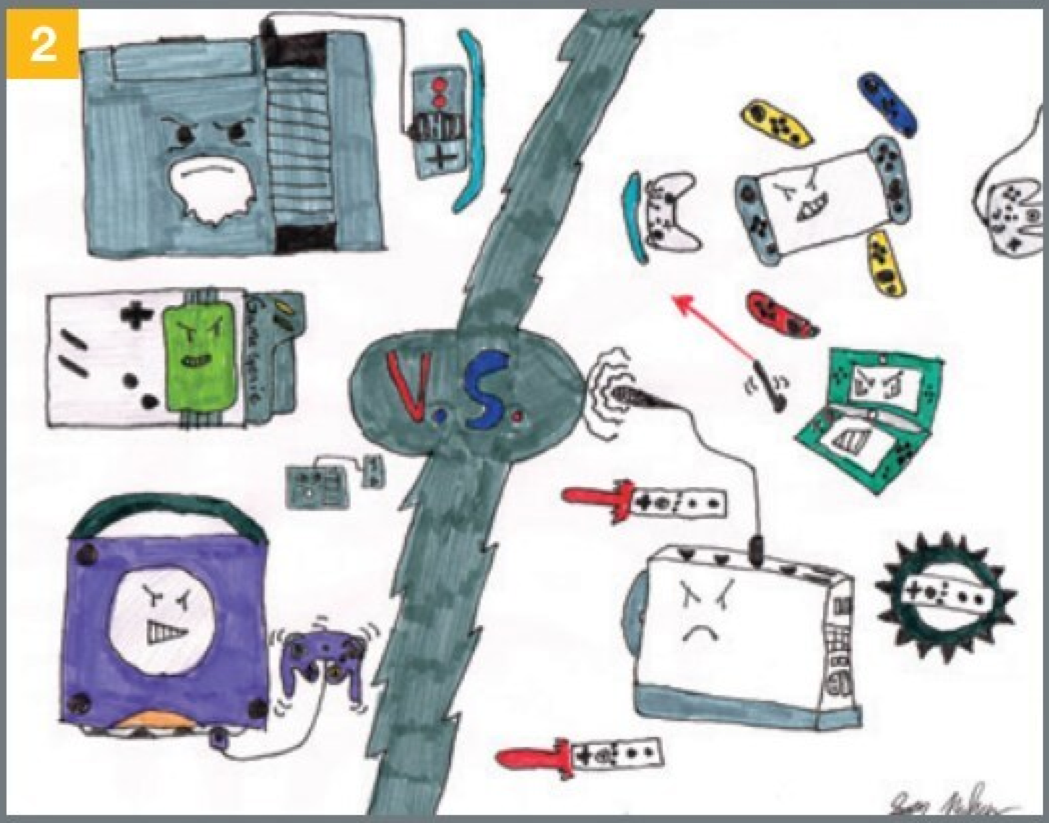
3 Amber Duenas

We tried googling "Link cat" to see if this was a reference to something, but the only results were weird pet cosplay.

4 Rayna Feltner

A good friend certainly comes in handy when trying to beat Cuphead, but the hooves are a serious disadvantage.

2



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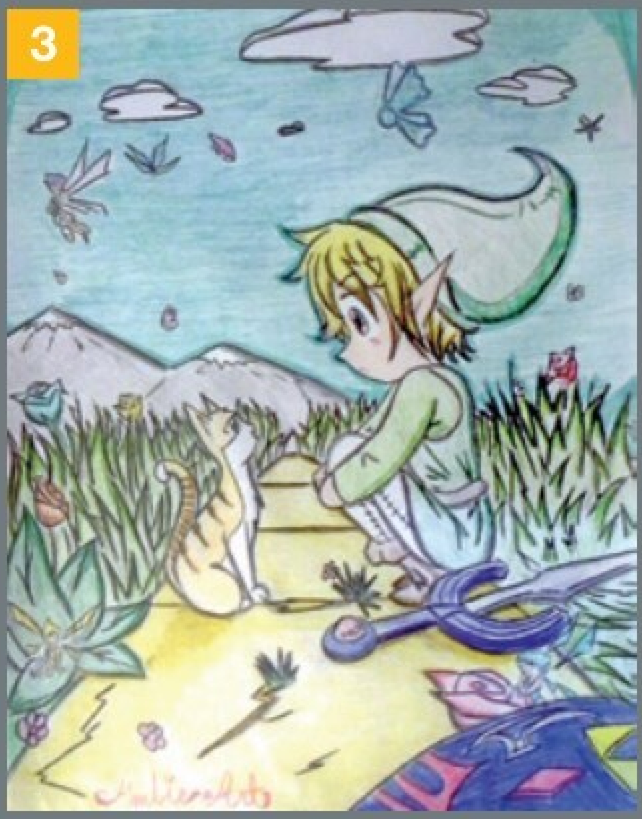

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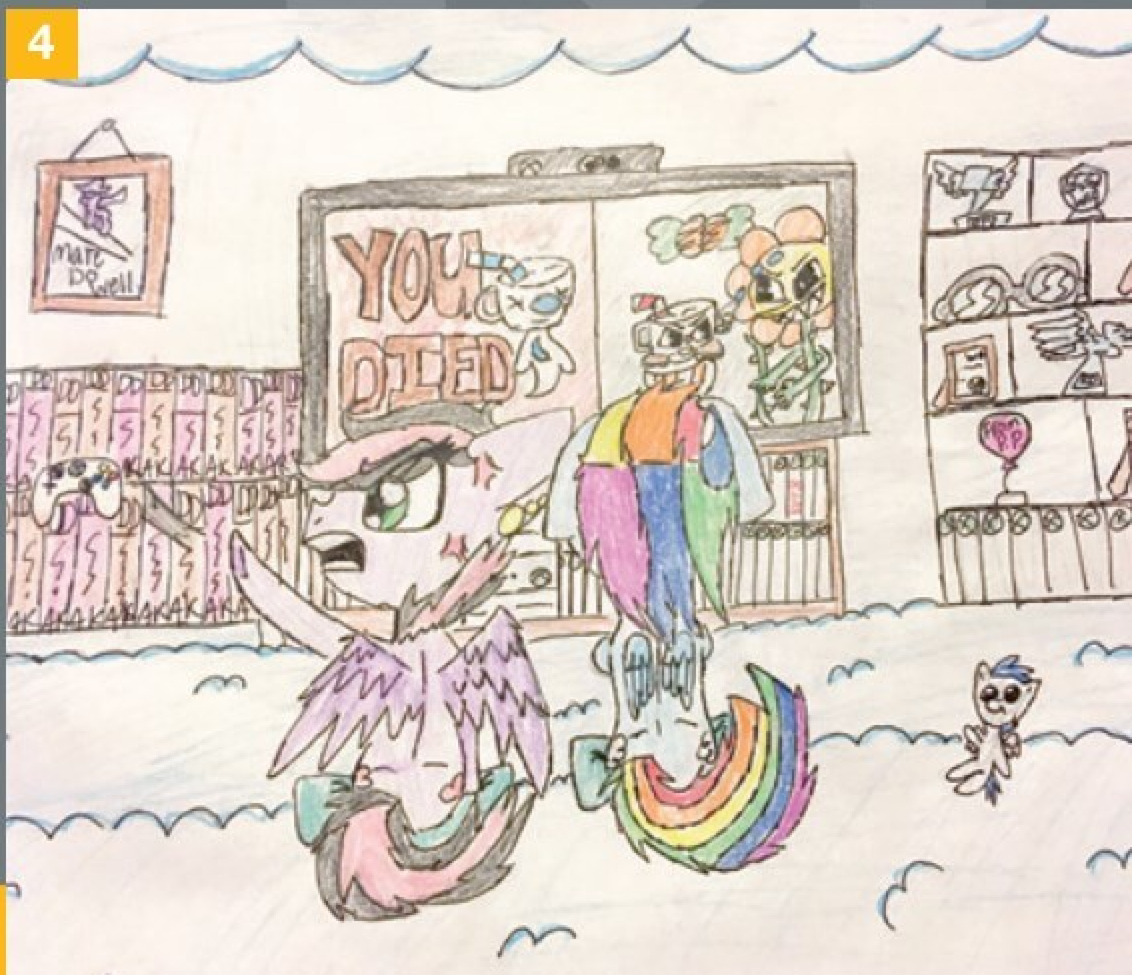

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MALL OF AMERICA

(Left) Did someone ask for Nindies? Because we've got Nindies! **(Right)** Shea cracked the case of the missing Detective Pikachu. Turns out he was at a Mall of America photo op the whole time!

THE TANGLED WEB OF VIDEO GAME ADDICTION

A LOOK INSIDE ONE OF THE MOST COMPLEX ISSUES FACING GAMING

BY KIMBERLEY WALLACE

Have you ever felt like you truly couldn't put a game down? Pulled a gaming all-nighter? Needed to play just one more turn… or fifty more turns? Games are designed to keep you engaged and playing. Often a sign of a good interactive experience is when the hours melt away as we play because we're enjoying the experience that much. As games grow more complex and keep enticing us with new content, their addictive qualities have been thrust into the spotlight, making it a hot topic with exhausting debates about its prevalence, how to treat it, and if video game addiction is indeed a modern psychological disorder.

Truth be told, researchers and psychological professionals still don't have great data to say for certain what we're dealing with when people can't power down. And yet, it's impossible to ignore the news stories or personal accounts of those who have had games negatively impact their lives, from Fortnite being cited in divorce filings to professional sports teams like the Vancouver Canucks banning it and other games during the season. On the other side of the coin, you can't dismiss the positive power of games, either. They bring people together and have been used as an outlet for those who struggle with everything from intense stress to major depression and anxiety. Games are now being used as a learning tool in many classrooms, as well.

We talked to various researchers and psychological experts to discover what is currently known about video games and addiction. As with many things in life, this is a highly complex and murky issue. Here's a look inside the challenges facing gamers, experts, and advocacy groups.

photo: L. Cipriani

The World Health Assembly is an annual event where experts meet to determine policies

WHERE WE'RE AT

You've probably seen news stories pop up talking about video game addiction. Everyone seems to have an opinion on the matter. Even Britain's Prince Harry recently said Fortnite should be banned, proclaiming he believes it's more addictive than drugs or alcohol. Countries like Iraq went one step further and outlawed battle royale games like Fortnite and PUBG Mobile due to their addictive nature. As more stories like these make their way into the news, the pressure is on researchers to find answers about what's truly going on.

Currently, The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), a handbook published by the American Psychiatric Association to classify mental health disorders, lists internet gaming disorder as an area requiring more research, which means it's not ruling it out and it will be discussed in 2020 for inclusion in the DSM-6. The DSM is considered an authoritative guide for diagnosis used by a wide array of healthcare professionals, such as clinicians, researchers, health insurance companies, policy makers, and more. Since the DSM's last publication, The World Health Organization (WHO) recently listed gaming disorder as a disease in its draft for the 11th revision of the International Classification of Diseases, which is comparable to the DSM but isn't exclusive to psychiatric disorders. It voted for final inclusion just this past month at the agency's 72nd World Health Assembly in Geneva, Switzerland, deciding to officially classify "gaming disorder" as a behavioral addiction. The new revision goes into effect on Jan. 1, 2022. Its current definition lists that "the pattern of gaming behavior must be characterized by impaired control over gaming, increasing priority given to gaming over other activities to the extent that gaming takes precedence over other interests and daily activities, and continuation or escalation of gaming despite the occurrence of negative consequences." To be diagnosed, this must go on for at least 12 months and cause a significant impairment in personal, family, social, educational, occupational or other important areas of functioning.

The WHO classification decision was met with both support and criticism [see ESA sidebar], leading to passionate conversations within the scientific community. "I think it's a difficult time with lots of very strong opinions on both sides," says Patrick M. Markey, professor and director of the IR Laboratory at Villanova University. "It's almost the new violent video games."

Even with diverging opinions and concerns over incomplete data, there could be other reasons for it making its way into the International Classifications for Diseases. It's almost a catch-22; listing it as a disorder carries some heavy connotations, but for those who need help it's almost a necessary evil to ensure insurance coverage. "If you don't make it a disorder,

THE ESA FIGHTS BACK

The ESA (Electronic Software Association) took a strong stance against the World Health Organization's proposed disorder classification, immediately issuing a statement urging them to reverse their decision, saying: "The World Health Organization knows that common sense and objective research prove video games are not addictive." When asked about why it was important to respond, ESA president and CEO Stanley Pierre-Louis reiterated there is no medical consensus regarding the term "gaming disorder." "From our perspective, anyone who feels they need help should get the help they need," he says. "I think our concern becomes when video games become the blame, as opposed to really addressing whatever that underlying problem might be."

Some think the ESA's outspoken approach hasn't been helpful and might be turning a blind eye to a real issue. "The gaming industry itself, especially around the violence of video games conversation, has just always been very defensive," says Game Quitters founder Cam Adair. "You could say maybe rightfully, and so I think that they've shown a lot of resistance to this idea that some people in the community are struggling. For me, that's always been kind of ironic, because as someone who was a hardcore gamer, it's not like people gaming too much was a big secret in the community."

then people can't get reimbursed for treatment," says psychologist and University of Wisconsin Madison professor C. Shawn Green. "But if you do make it a disorder, there's all kinds of stigmas associated with mental disorders, and those stigmas can have consequences."

Some feel the WHO taking this first step will open the doors for more awareness and better research funding, hopefully leading to better treatments and insurance assistance. Many professionals feel the guidelines provide a good starting point and mirror what they've seen in their own research and personal lives. "I think it's really sensible," says BYU human development professor Sarah Coyne, who just completed the longest longitudinal study on video game addiction [see "New Research Has Interesting Findings" sidebar on page 16]. "It's based on the criteria for other type of substance use disorders. The individuals that I've seen personally, who I would say, 'You've got a problem with video games,' I see a lot of those same symptoms. They can't cope with the real world so they just turn to games, and then just get kind of sucked in."

However, others feel like the research is still inconclusive and the WHO's criteria is too broad, causing concern that it makes premature claims without sufficient evidence. "There's a lot of concern about the diagnostic criteria that is super vague, and that you can replace basically gaming with anything, playing soccer, reading books, whatever, and it would still kind of hold no matter where you place it," says Rachel Kowert, research director of Take This, a non-profit whose mission is to decrease the stigma for mental health discussions in the game industry.

Right now, specific addictions like "exercise," "food," or "being a workaholic" aren't their own entities, so it brings into question what would make video games require a special classification. Add in that data still doesn't show that playing video games has any substantial impact on our brains. "We have decades and decades of research into the effects of video games," Kowert explains. "And if you take the broad perspective, the effects of it is neutral at best. It's going to have some good effects, and maybe in some extreme cases, you could link it to some sort of adverse effects. But generally, the effect of media on an individual in relation to any particular outcome is not significant."

Another area of contention is the theories on the cause of excessive video gaming. Researchers' hypotheses ran the gamut. Some support it being treated like substance abuse, while others view it as a behavioral addiction like gambling or hoarding. Most people I consulted believe when people game at problematic levels it is most likely an underlying symptom of a deeper issue, such as depression or anxiety. The WHO's classification of gaming disorder also doesn't offer much clarity on when someone should be diagnosed with it, lacking specific symptoms.

The world doesn't have concrete answers on whether video game addiction is real, how many people have it if so, and how to actually treat it. The research also isn't the greatest, relying on self-reports, convenience samples, and small test groups. "The research base right now is relatively young, relatively new, so there's also lots of problems with it," says Kelli Dunlap, director of mental health research and design at iThrive-Games. "The way the studies are carried out, the way they select their participants, the way the information is analyzed, and the way the information is presented – it is really problematic. That goes for people who have found that games don't have addictive qualities as well as people who have found that games are addictive."

It's important to remember that research takes time, and technology evolves at such a rapid rate that it's difficult for studies and science to keep pace. Scientists are often measuring different things and carrying out their studies in different ways as well, which is why one day we can see a news story on coffee being good for your health, while another says the opposite. With science taking some time to catch up, at the very least we are watching video games and other technology get more thoroughly researched, which can only help us learn more about their potential impact.

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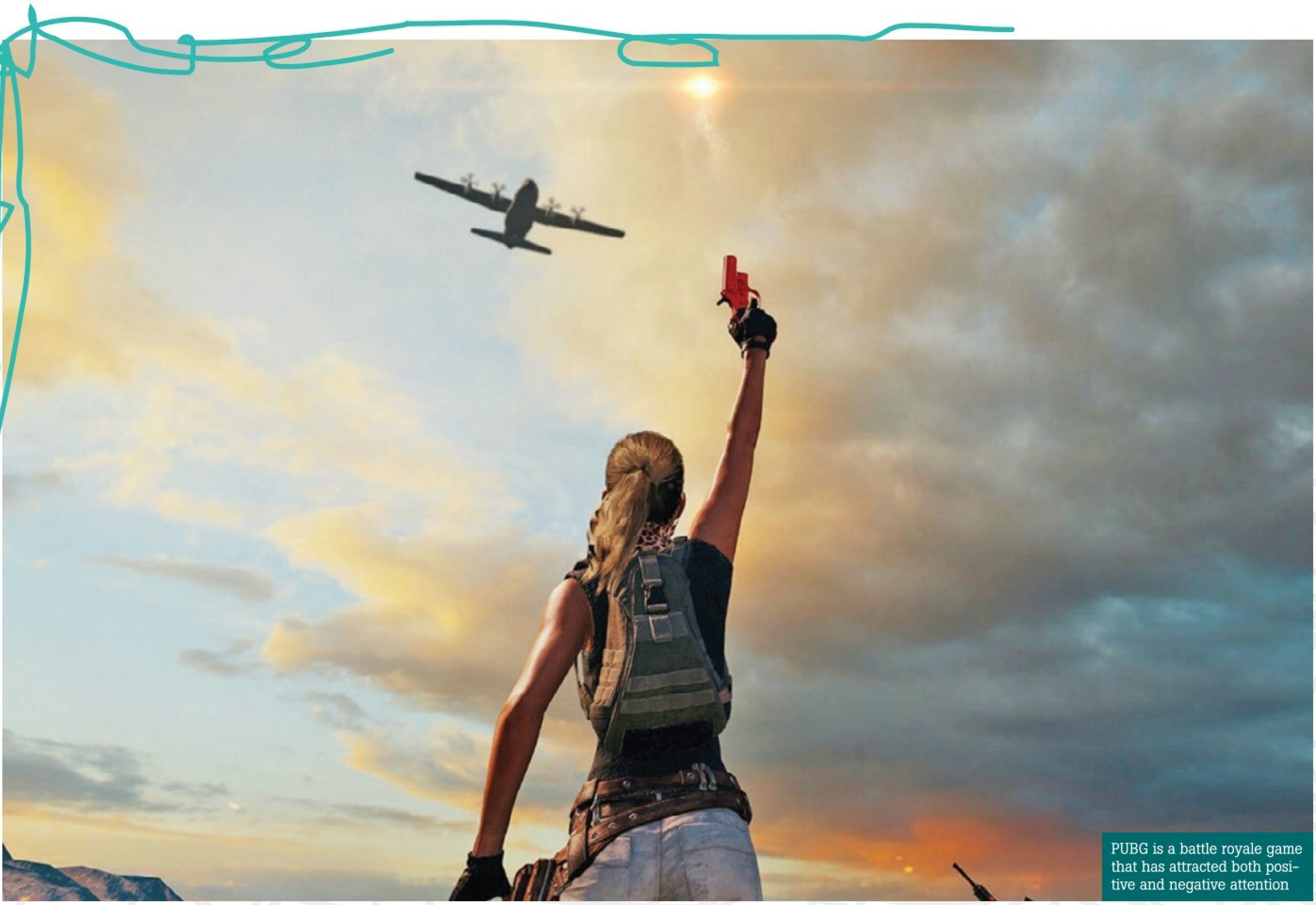
LOOT BOX COMPLICATIONS

Loot boxes are a whole other can of worms, but also come into the conversation about addiction, especially due to their comparisons to gambling. Lootboxes are a virtual Skinner Box, training players that they should derive positive feelings from opening them, even if the contents become less valuable. Countries like Belgium and the Netherlands have flat-out banned games from using them. This is another area that's still being debated, with many calling for legislation and being concerned about ethics. "I think loot boxes and anything dealing with a random generator, that's where more researchers are split right now, even more than video game addiction," says Anthony Bean, a clinical psychologist and executive director at The Telos Project.

"There's been a little bit of literature on loot boxes, but there's not much yet," says Chris Ferguson, a professor and co-chair of psychology at Stetson University in Florida. "It's hard to say what real impact they have." Ferguson spoke to some early work citing people with gambling issues being more likely to spend money on them, which isn't unexpected, but there still is a lot that's uncertain. He says it's important games don't put "unreasonable burdens" on players when using loot boxes.

Kelli Dunlap of iThrive Games spoke about humans being poor estimators when it comes to money spent, and thinks extra things like parental controls, showing total purchases, or even money caps could go a long way. "It's not about being authoritarian and dictating players to do certain things or trying to legislate how players engage, but rather giving them the most tools possible to make the most informed decisions that they can," she says. "I do think that is on the games industry, largely, to do, especially if they want to avoid future issues with government legislation, rules, fines, things like that."

But are loot boxes any different from opening a pack of Pokémon cards in hopes of getting an ultra-rare, or having the surprise of not knowing which toy is in a blindbox? You're walking away with something – unlike gambling, which can leave you empty handed. Even so, the awareness has picked up with recently proposed legislation from Senator Josh Hawley (R-MO) that would fine publishers that include them in games targeted toward children. It's unlikely Hawley's push will be the last we see from governments, meaning all eyes are on publishers to ensure they're not being used in predatory ways.



PUBG is a battle royale game that has attracted both positive and negative attention

WHAT TO DO IF YOU HAVE A PROBLEM

Getting away from the focus on science and research, it's impossible to deny that people may need help with their gaming habits. But doing a quick Google search does not exactly yield much information or treatment options. "If you feel like your gaming is becoming problematic, you should definitely go talk to somebody like a therapist, " says Kelli Dunlap, director of mental health research and design at iThriveGames. Experts believe it's a bonus if you can find one who has some experience with games, so they can better evaluate what's cause for concern, but seek a professional first and foremost if you've noticed gaming negatively impacting your life.

If you're looking for support and suggestions of ways to improve your gaming habits, Cam Adair, who once considered himself addicted to games, formed Game Quitters out of his own frustration with the lack of resources out there for those struggling. The program has everything from personal accounts to tips on helpful alternatives. "The people who are actually struggling with it, I think so often they're the ones who are lost in the conversation," he explains. "We missed the fact that there are thousands of people coming forward just asking for help, and we need to figure out some way of helping them." Adair recommends trying to break away from gaming for 90 days, not forever, just as a test run.

For those concerned about their loved ones or selves, beware: Plenty of programs out there can take advantage of your fears and wallets. "A lot of people are getting advice in the guise of being coaches and running camps with no empirical scientific evidence at all to support their programs," says director of the IR Laboratory at Villanova University Patrick M. Markey. While this problem isn't exclusive to video game addiction, it's one of the bigger targets lately. "There are really good, licensed therapists that are helping people out using scientifically based practices and so forth." Markey notes the prevalence of clinics and detoxes being sold online and cautions: "They're charlatans, and they're just making money off of issues that don't exist, or they're giving you bad therapy or advice." To ensure you get the best help possible, check accreditation, credentials, and reviews. If you get overwhelmed, The American Psychological Association even has a locator you can find on its webpage (https://locator.apa.org/) to assist with the search and ensure you get matched with a professional. You can also contact your insurance company for recommendations.

WHAT WE CAN AGREE ON

The discussions and debates on video game addiction might sound like a mess, but we do have some clarity on the topic. To be clear, nobody I talked to denies problematic gaming habits exist, but based on findings, they believe it's only a small portion of the population, estimated between one to three percent, who actually have trouble powering down.

The vast majority of people play games without developing behavioral problems, but that small percentage who struggle with addiction isn't anything to scoff at. "It's a small percentage, but still a substantial number, given how widespread gaming is, of people who seem to be taking serious damage to their lives because of the way in which they're doing it," says Iowa State University developmental psychology professor Douglas Gentile. "It's not just a fad they go through when the newest Black Ops comes out."

Gentile is one of the leading researchers in the US on the positive and negative effects of media, with 30 years under his belt and various awards to show for it. Based on current data, he says when somebody has a problem, they rarely get better on their own and require some sort of intervention. Once they have guidance, they do improve. He also wasn't shy about his frustrations with how dismissive many have been about the issue, especially within the games industry. "If we could at least have a proper public education campaign that says it is a real legitimate problem for some players and this is what it looks like, we might actually

Kelli Dunlap works at The iThrive Games Foundation to benefit teens at the intersection of game development, education, and mental health

see the prevalence go way down, because parents start noticing it and people start noticing within themselves before it becomes a problem," he says.

At the very least, there seems to be a general consensus on when gaming becomes a problem and you should seek help. Most gamers can attest to times they've overdone it, but that doesn't necessarily indicate a serious problem. "Doing something a lot, it's not an addiction," Gentile explains. "An addiction means doing something in such a way that it damages your life. And it can't just damage your life in one area, because with anything you love, you will sacrifice some other part of your life [for it]. It has to damage it in lots of areas, and [be] so far out of balance that you're not able to succeed in any other areas of your life because of it."

Another good indicator of an issue is whether you're really enjoying the time you're gaming. If you're doing it in spite of that or even when it puts you in a worse mood, it could be a sign something isn't right. We all have moments of frustration with games, but addiction goes beyond that. You're playing out of obligation for that one more turn in Sid Meier's Civilization, or overnight PUBG gauntlets consistently leave you weary and unprepared for the next day, and yet you can't stop.

No magic number of hours played can determine whether or not you're addicted and need help. Some people can game a lot and not have it negatively impact their lives. Others can't. This goes for any addiction, but people seem even more focused on numbers when it comes to gaming. "Lots of people think that just because someone plays a lot, they're addicted and consider it an addiction," Kowert says, regarding common misconceptions. "It has to have detrimental effects in every single area of an individual's life."

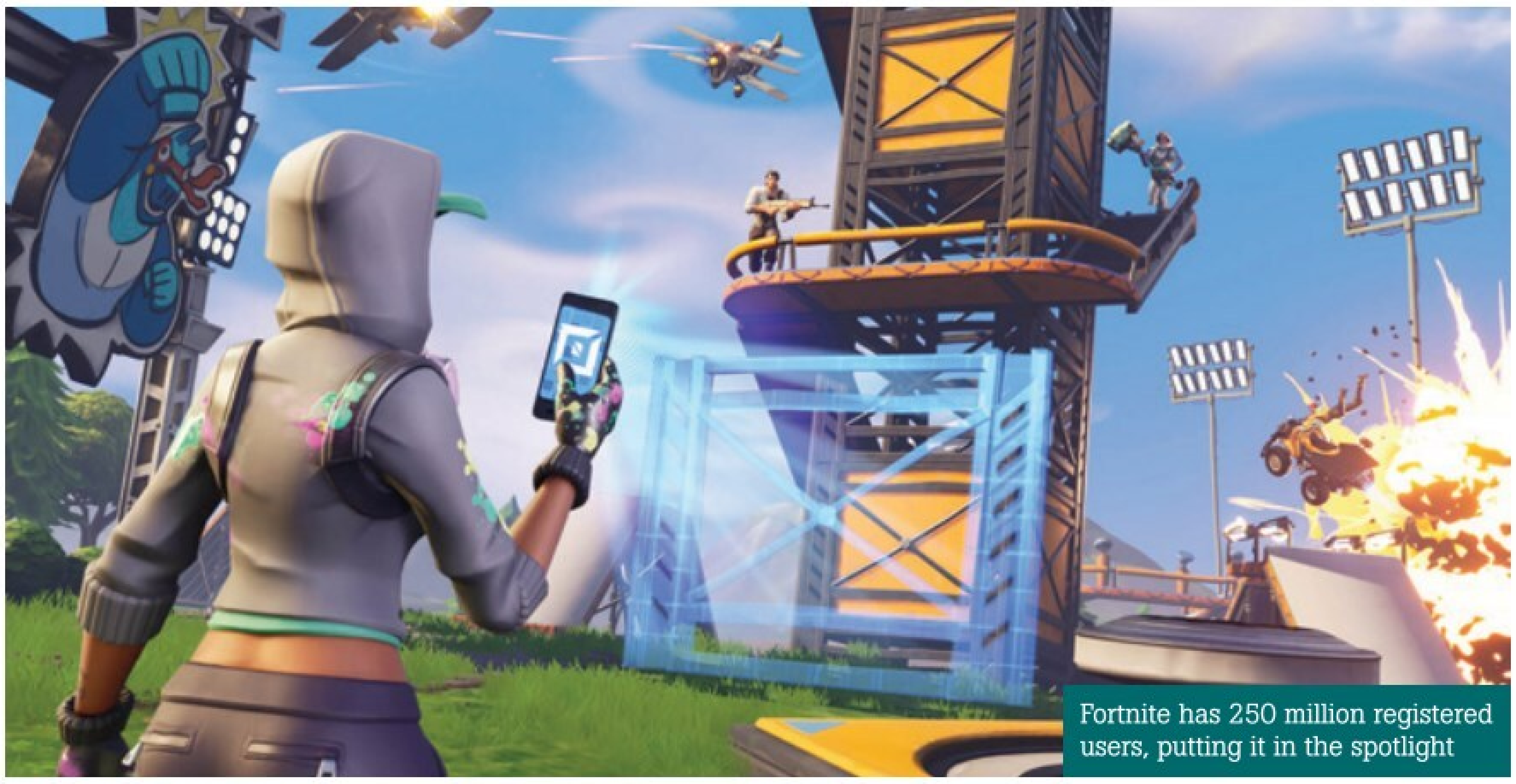
The effect gaming is having on your life has to be pretty drastic before you need to be concerned, but many people have continued to game in spite of losing everything around them. Gaming is no longer a coping mechanism for the things going poorly in their life, but instead becomes the cause of failing out school, losing a job, or drifting away from a significant other.

PARENTAL GUIDANCE ON GAMING HABITS

Parents are often the first ones to spot when something is off with their children's behavior. With gaming addiction making more headlines, it's only natural to have concern. If this is the case, almost all professionals discussed consulting a therapist as a family. Nowadays, technology is so ingrained in our everyday lives, and gaming has increasingly become a social activity among children, that it can be hard to determine what's problematic versus normal engagement for many parents.

Many experts say keeping lines of communication open with children about their gaming is key to understanding it and knowing when something is awry. "I would definitely encourage parents to talk to their children first," says Kelli Dunlap, director of mental health research and design at iThriveGames, a non-profit that studies the issue. "Don't just automatically assume 'My kid is playing Fortnite, therefore, he or she is addicted.' Some guidance that I like to give parents is that if your child was using the time they spend gaming to read a book or play a sport, would you still be concerned?" Dunlap said if you're on the outside of the gaming world, sitting down with your child and having them teach you about the game and explain what they love about it and why they play can be very helpful.

Parents can also monitor their children's gaming to make sure things are on a healthy level. The ESA provides game ratings to give parents and consumers more information on games, but it also encourages tapping into the parental controls. "One of the things that we do to empower consumers and especially parents is the ability to limit screen time with use of parental controls," says the ESA's president and CEO Stanley Pierre-Louis. Pierre-Louis spoke positively about the Nintendo Switch allowing you to activate parental controls in real time with the app, which will give you updates about your children's activity. All major consoles currently have some form of parental controls that allow you to put extra efforts into ensuring your child is gaming safely.



Fortnite has 250 million registered users, putting it in the spotlight

NEW RESEARCH HAS INTERESTING FINDINGS

New research surrounding game addiction is coming out rapidly, and experts have expressed wanting more longitudinal data that studies participants' habits over time. BYU human development professor Sarah Coyne just published interesting findings in her lab, as her team tracked players over a six-year period, making it the longest longitudinal study to date. Coyne measured pathological gaming levels by using proposed criteria set forth in the DSM-5 for internet gaming disorder. To be considered addicted, you must have at least five of these traits: a preoccupation with gaming, experience withdrawal symptoms (sadness, anxiety, irritability), formed a tolerance where you need to spend more time gaming to satisfy the urge, have the inability to reduce playing time, abandon or lose interest in activities previously enjoyed, continue to game despite problems, deceive friends or family members on actual time spent gaming, use gaming to reduce negative moods, and have jeopardized or lost a job or relationship due to it.

The study found a small group of people stayed addicted to games over the course of the time, while others, who didn't show any addiction at the beginning, would grow eventually addicted. Then another group who started addicted weren't by the end of the study. "Yes, [they're] very different trajectories, with the vast majority of people who play video games with no symptoms at all,' Coyne notes.

However, one thing she found really interesting is that whether your addiction increased, decreased, or remained stable, just having a video game addiction at any point tended to be related to a negative outcome. "We didn't find any evidence that it was ever a good thing to be addicted," Coyne says. "The biggest [negative outcome] was subjects were far less likely to be going to college or employed. They also had lower levels of empathy, higher aggression, and more financial distress."

WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS

For now, the conversation continues to heat up in the aftermath of the WHO recognizing gaming disorder as a disease. In the past, the DSM has tended to follow its lead, and in 2020 it will be decided if the DSM will define and classify internet gaming disorder, an area it previously said required more research. "I won't be surprised [if it's included]," Coyne says. "We're kind of moving toward that direction, and I think that with more research coming out, we're recognizing that, yeah, this can be a significant problem for a small number of people."

However, there are concerns that including it without substantive, conclusive research could cause more harm than good. Once something is classified and defined in the DSM and The International Manual for Diseases, it's difficult to reverse course. "It's super rare for a diagnosis to be taken out; that's the concern," says Anthony Bean, a clinical psychologist and executive director at The Telos Project, a nonprofit mental health clinic focused on video gamers and their families. "With the World Health Organization, we have seen reclassifications of things that have had to be reversed, but only after several decades," adds ESA

Some players of popular MMOs like World of Warcraft have detailed how hard it is for them to step away from their virtual worlds president and CEO Stanley Pierre-Louis. Pierre-Louis points to mischaracterizations of ADHD, gender identity, and homosexuality, which took decades to overturn. He doesn't want to see that happen again.

At the very least, through the recent potential classifications, media attention, and debates within the scientific community, more awareness is being brought to the value of research and where things need to improve. "For any organization like the WHO to recognize a new addiction like this, those are 10-to-15-year cycles," Adair explains. "Decades of research goes into it ... and based on what's in those manuals, that certainly impacts the public conversation. In the last year two years, the pace at which this issue is coming forward is very rapid and a big part of that is the World Health Organization recognizing it. It has shifted the public conversation around the topic."

Not only has the conversation picked up in the public eye, but it's also forced scientists to reevaluate the current research we have, opening a larger discussion about where the shortcomings are. "We need to change the culture of research to take the time to create really high-quality, standardized, pre-registered, open science that can be much more informative than what we have now," Ferguson says.

Markley agrees in seeing studies on the rise and appreciates the benefits, but also has some concerns. "I think we're learning a lot as a field. I think one of my bigger worries is sometimes the public gets ahead of our research, or sometimes it takes the research and molds it into a story they want to tell."

Another question that's still in flux: if this is a problem, how exactly should it be treated? It's not like an infection, where you can take an antibiotic and get better. Even different therapies are more successful than others, depending on the person. Psychological experts admit they're still figuring this out, [see What To Do If You Have A Problem sidebar].

"I'd like there to be better treatment out there," Coyne says. "But we're kind of floundering a little bit, and just trying a bunch of different things. Some kind of work. We're still trying to figure that out."

While we still don't have a lot of answers, one thing all psychologists reiterated is that moderation is key. This isn't about taking away video games, which many said they don't believe is the answer. Instead, it's about enjoying your hobby in a healthy way. Perhaps Coyne said it best: "[It's about] finding that balance and that sweet spot of where you are able to play video games and have them work for you. You're having a wonderful experience, you're engaged, and it's a positive thing in your life as opposed to when it really takes over and you're working for the game at that point." ◆

Cam Adair struggled with his own gaming addiction, making it his mission to help others and bring awareness to the issue

Take A Trip To Bullet Hell Heaven

by Matt Miller

I've always been curious that one of the genres with the most bullets and explosions is also one of the places to go if you want to uncover the most zen-like gaming flows. Bullet hell shooters take a degree of focus and concentration that really appeals to me, and this month I came across two particularly striking upcoming entries in the milieu.

I almost wrote **Nova Drift** off as a simple Asteroids clone a few minutes into my first run, and that would have been a big mistake. Undoubtedly, with its pilot-perspective controls, single screen view, and omni-directional shooting, all the fundamentals recall the earliest roots of the space shooter. But its integration of rogue-lite unlocks and a ridiculous level of ship customization transforms the game into something magical.

Developer Chimeric is regularly updating the current early access build, and the version available now is already well worth your time. Players control an evolving biomechanical ship that is constantly shifting in response to a growing tide of alien foes as they fly into view. An impressive variety of enemy ships and attack configurations begin to reveal themselves, from giant rotating beam emitters and fast-moving homing craft, to long serpentine foes that weave unpredictably to protect their weak spots. Vacuum-like singularities cross the screen as you drift through the void, pulling everything into their wake unless you actively thrust away. As the wave number climbs, the screen gets more and more dangerous, demanding ever-increasing destructive capability.

That firepower comes through a leveling system that repeats from scratch in each playthrough. By defeating enemies, you level up every few seconds, opening up a new evolution. Core gear selection of weapon type, ship body, and shields forms the basis of your build, but every subsequent level lets you either change one of those gear choices or mod your existing ship with one of dozens of dramatic upgrades. The theory-crafting options that open up are exciting. Do I double down on constructs, turrets, and mines, while shoring up my shields? Or turn my own ship into a ramming juggernaut that can rocket through enemies? I can't count the number of potential twists.

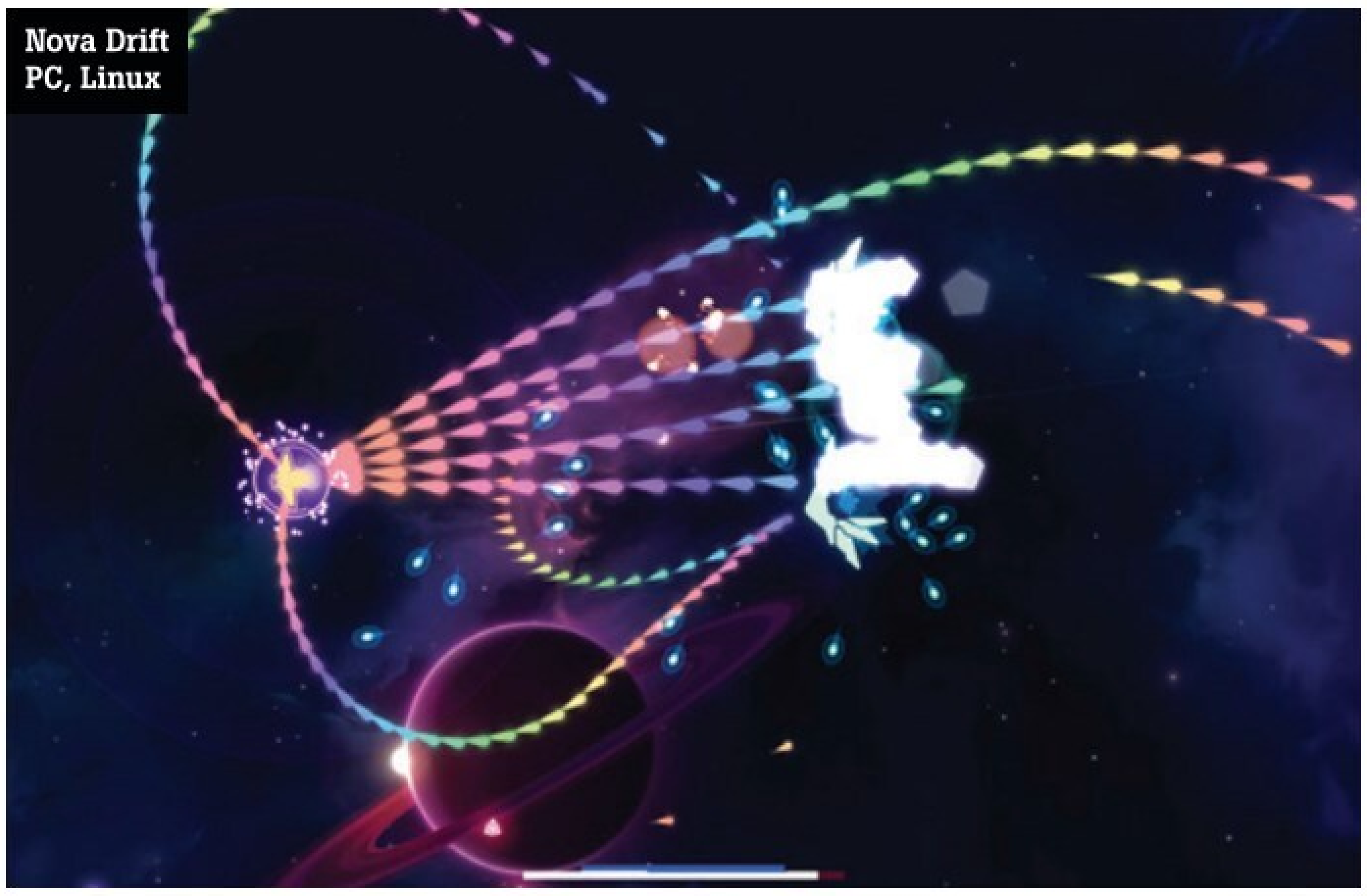
I fell down a rabbit hole for hours one afternoon, simply trying out different ship variations. New mods unlock as you score ever greater point totals, while also unlocking more challenging styles of play, where enemies are even stronger but yield greater scores. The controls are tight and responsive, even as you make drastic changes to the way your ship moves and fires. The weapons feel varied and exciting, like a raging electromagnetic pulse blast, or a sniper-like railgun.

The early access version includes the satisfying endless game mode, but the final game will also feature a campaign when it releases in early 2020. The game is available on PC, with Linux coming soon. In addition, Chimeric hopes to explore Switch as a first console destination, with PS4 and Xbox on the docket if earlier platforms go well.

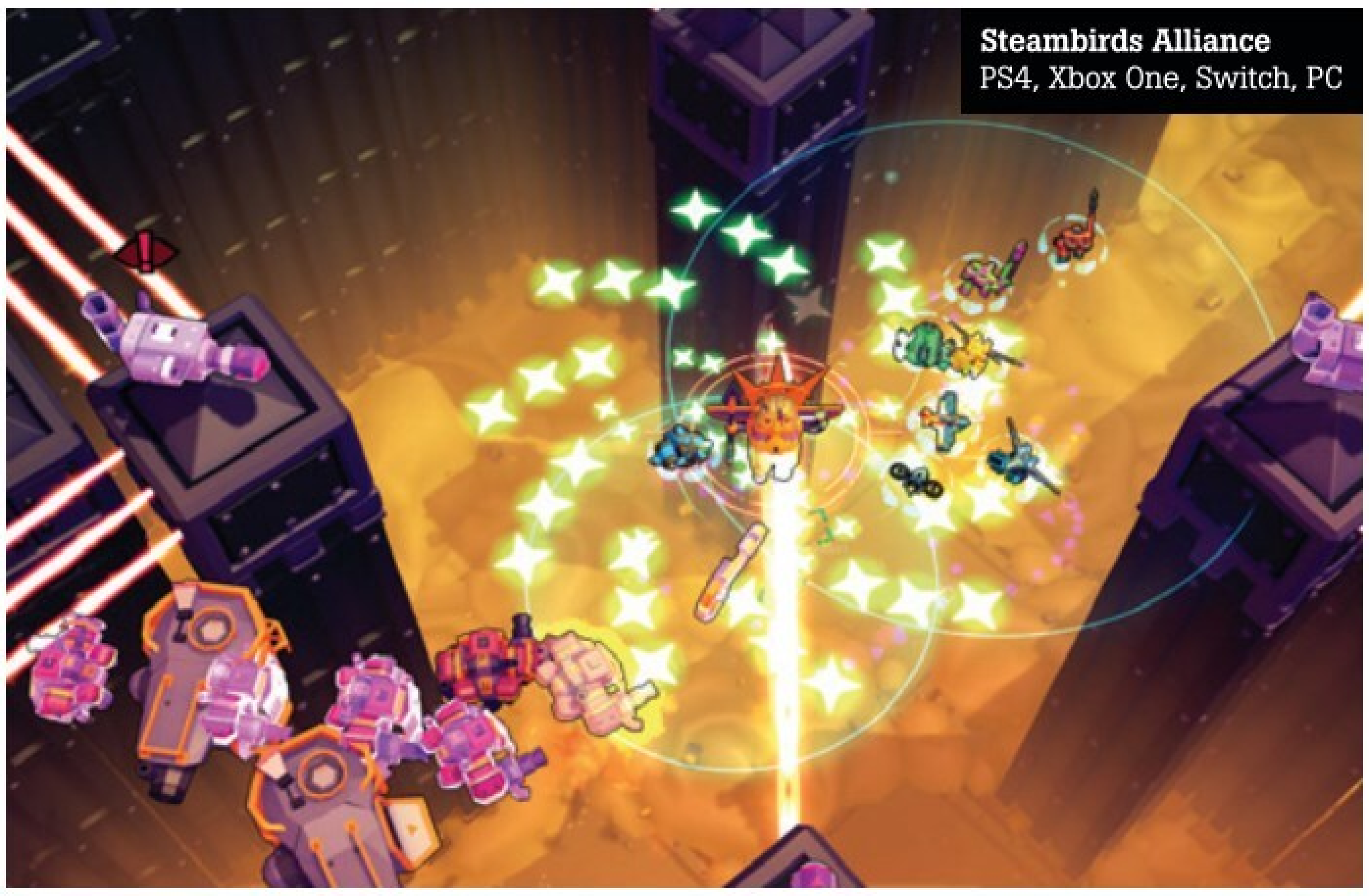
I also spent several hours flying around the world of **Steambirds Alliance**, which is offering something distinct and unusual: the combination of shoot-em-up bullet hell flight combat with strong ties to cooperative MMO and action/RPG play. Players take on the role of a bird flying an upgradeable dieselpunk ship on a quest to bring down a vast fleet of mechanical enemies led by some conniving anthropomorphic cats, but it's really an excuse for a lot of destructive and cooperative fun.

Developer Spry Fox has big ambitions for the project, as dozens of players (up to 60 in an instance) can join together to roam across the vast open world. A seemingly endless stream of enemy vehicles spew projectiles and upgrades, even as you jet back and forth from the front lines back to base to improve. My ship went down regularly along with all its fancy enhancements, but my pilot level was constantly increasing, unlocking new skills and opening up new planes, which amount to character classes.

With an arcade visual style that recalls early hits like 1942, but design concepts borrowed from modern day rogue-lites, MMOs, and action/RPGs, Steambirds Alliance is a surprising twist on expectation. The project should be in open beta by the time you read this, with a final release on PC in July. PS4, Xbox One, and Switch are all coming later.



Nova Drift
PC, Linux



Steambirds Alliance
PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC

The Good

SONY continues to reveal new details on what the next PlayStation is capable of, including Sony Interactive Entertainment deputy president John Kodera alluding to the possibility that next-gen PlayStation owners could play with and against current PS4 owners. “Cross-generation, the community can enjoy the games together,” he said at a corporate strategy meeting.

The Bad

PSYCHONAUTS 2 (shown) publisher and Payday 2 developer Starbreeze keeps getting bad news, with the latest omen coming from the company’s quarterly shareholder report. If it stays on its current trajectory, the company doesn’t expect to last another 12 months at its.

In other bad news, **NIPPON ICHI** has reportedly been unable to pay its employees after the poor launch of the mobile Disgaea RPG. As of the time of this writing, the company is trying to raise emergency funds.

The Ugly

U.S. SENATORS Josh Hawley (R-MO), Ed Markey (D-MA), and Richard Blumenthal (D-CT) introduced bipartisan legislation regulating “certain pay-to-win microtransactions and sales of loot boxes in interactive digital entertainment products.” While this is something many gamers agree on in a broad sense, things could get ugly when it comes to enforcing and defining what falls under this legislation as it’s currently worded.

While it spells out microtransactions that give players an advantage in multiplayer games, it also includes items you can purchase to aid “narrative progression.” Similarly, when detailing its prohibition of microtransactions in “minor-oriented games,” the bill doesn’t use the existing ESRB rating system and broadly defines any all-ages game as targeting minors.

The bill has a long way to go on its legislative journey, so hopefully its idiosyncrasies can be ironed out so we don’t end up with a law nobody likes.

Quotable

> **“Gaming must be a safe environment. Creating community is shared work, and protecting community is essential work, so we all carry part of the payload of community safety – game industry and gamers alike.”**

Phil Spencer, head of Xbox

Name:
Emmanuel
Mojica Rosas

Occupation:
Elementary
school teacher

Twitter:
Mojica_Rosas

Instagram:
mojica_rosas_
emmanuel

Mythical Treasures

The story of a dedicated fan who won a Guinness World Record for the largest God of War collection in the world

Emmanuel Mojica Rosas, who resides in Jalisco, Nayarit in Mexico, is a huge God of War fan. He's amassed nearly 600 God of War items to date, including shirts, varying game editions, keychains, and more. His efforts haven't gone unnoticed. Back in 2015, he was invited to Sony Santa Monica's studio to participate in a video marking God of War's 10-year anniversary. Fast-forward three years, and he's been asked to return to the studio, where the developers surprised him with a Guinness World Record for the largest God of War collection in the world.

interview by Elise Favis

When did you start playing God of War?

It was in 2009 or 2010. My friend bought the game, and I started to play it too. Immediately I thought, "Wow, this is amazing." I was hooked. [In 2011], my grandmother died, and I used to play the game for fun but in that precise moment, everything was complicated in my life – I was also fired from my job. A colleague of mine told me that I would never be an excellent teacher because I'm a terrible person and that I don't focus. That day was very tough in my life and in that moment, at night, I would just come to play God of War 2. I came to the part [in the story] at Lahkesis' temple where she tells [Kratos] that he cannot change his own destiny. Kratos fights her and is okay in the end. It was at that moment where I decided to [start] teaching English only [in my career]. I put my life in another direction and that helped me a lot. God of War changed my life.

How did Sony first get in touch with you about your collection?

In 2015, I saw a post in Facebook [from Sony Santa Monica] that said, "We're looking for the #1 fan, and if you consider yourself an excellent God of War fan, please let us know." I remember I saw that post and something inside of me said, "Come on, Emmanuel, you have a lot of pictures of your collection. Post one of those pictures." So I replied to that post on Facebook with a picture [of the collection]. Later they contacted me and said, "I saw your collection and it's very, very impressive. Maybe we can have a conversation later."

They wanted me to go to an event for the ten-year anniversary of God of War. I travelled in 2016 to California and we made [the video] "Makers & Gamers: God of War" and I was the first person in the world to play the new God of War. I [also attended the E3 showcase] for the announcement. For me, it was the best E3 ever. It was amazing.

When did you first apply for the Guinness World Record? Was attaining that record always your goal?

In 2015, I remembered the tenth anniversary of God of War and I made my account with Guinness World Records. I asked them to make a record for God of War. I proposed myself [to be a record holder] for my collection because I have a lot of items. In the beginning, they asked me to collect 2,000 different items. I said, "I think that's a lot of items. How about 500 or maybe 400?" And they said "OK. 500." [At the time] I had about 350 items, so I needed 150 items more.

What was your reaction when Sony Santa Monica surprised you with the Guinness World Record?

I remember when I reached 500 items, I told [Sony Santa Monica] that we finished and that we made it. And they said, "Let's see what happens with Guinness World Records," Once everything was ready, they told me I'd have to come to the studio for the first [new] God of War anniversary. I didn't know anything about [what the plan was]. We were in the car and they asked, "Do you know what we are doing here?" And I said, "No I don't have any idea." They kept it secret and I didn't know what was going on.

We went out to the lobby and they said I could take pictures and then speak with [God of War creative director Cory Barlog]. He wanted to know about my story and my God of War collection. When I went to open the door, I saw everyone looking at me and thought, "What the hell is going on?" I hugged Cory and everyone was clapping.

It was a lot of emotions [when they presented me the Guinness World Record]. It was nervousness, excitement, worry. I was in shock. I was thinking, "I can't believe that I'm here. It must be a dream." They gave me the golden master CD [of the first God of War]. It was a lot of excitement. I thought I would have a heart attack.

Would you ever consider starting a new collection for another game?

[Collecting] God of War items took me almost 10 years. When you make this kind of collection, you have to have a lot of money and sometimes you need free time to check Ebay, searching for the items that you need. Sometimes you need to save a lot of money for one item. If you want to be the best, you have to sacrifice a lot. It's complicated in your social life. I put my small town [on the map] and my community is proud of me. I think this collection will be my legacy.

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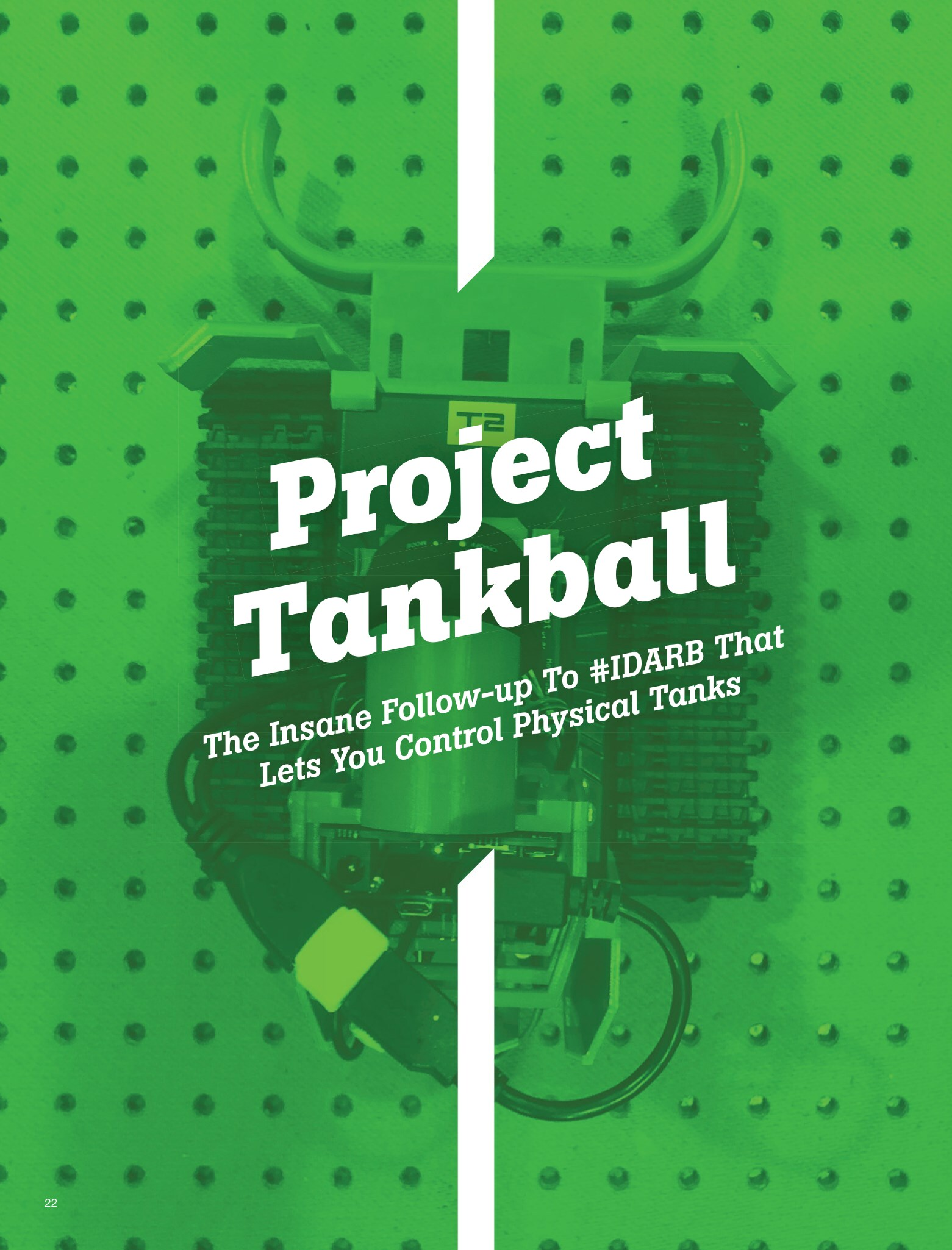
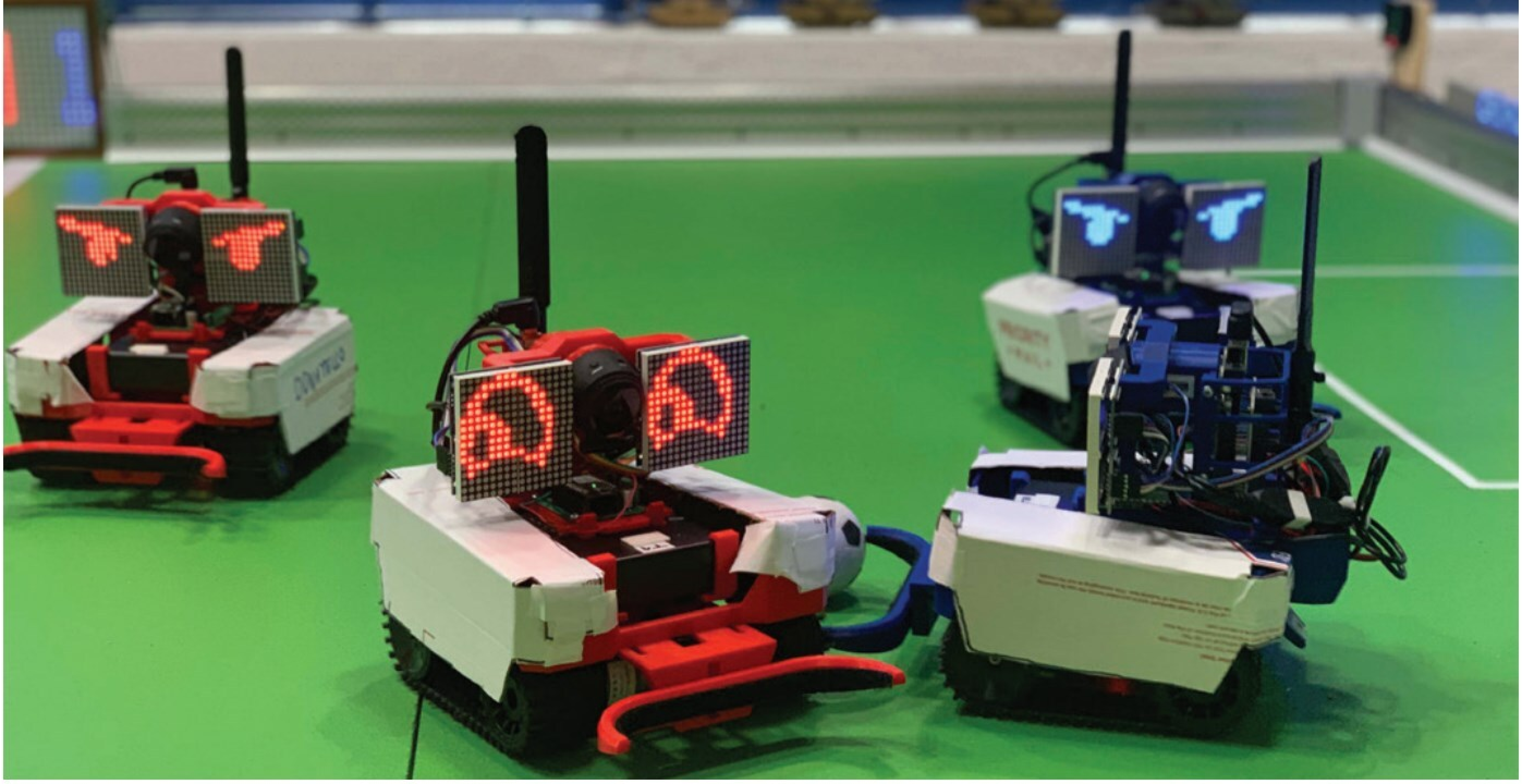


Project Tankball

The Insane Follow-up To #IDARB That Lets You Control Physical Tanks



by Ben Reeves

In January of 2014, designer Mike Mika posted a tweet that read, "Contemplating building a game entirely with my friends on twitter/fb - Totally open and Mad Lib style." That game eventually evolved into the chaotic, eight-player arena game #IDARB. Now, Mika is hoping to recreate that hive-mind development magic again, but this time he's teamed up with Mixer and Tested so users can remote control miniature tanks within the real world through the internet.

"We started talking to Microsoft and the Mixer team years ago about how we could use their Mixplay functionality to create online games, which we thought was cool because the latency was some of the fastest we'd seen," Mika says. "We thought we could do some amazing games with that. We started doing several experiments, but the one that intrigued us the most was the idea of controlling real world things with an audience."

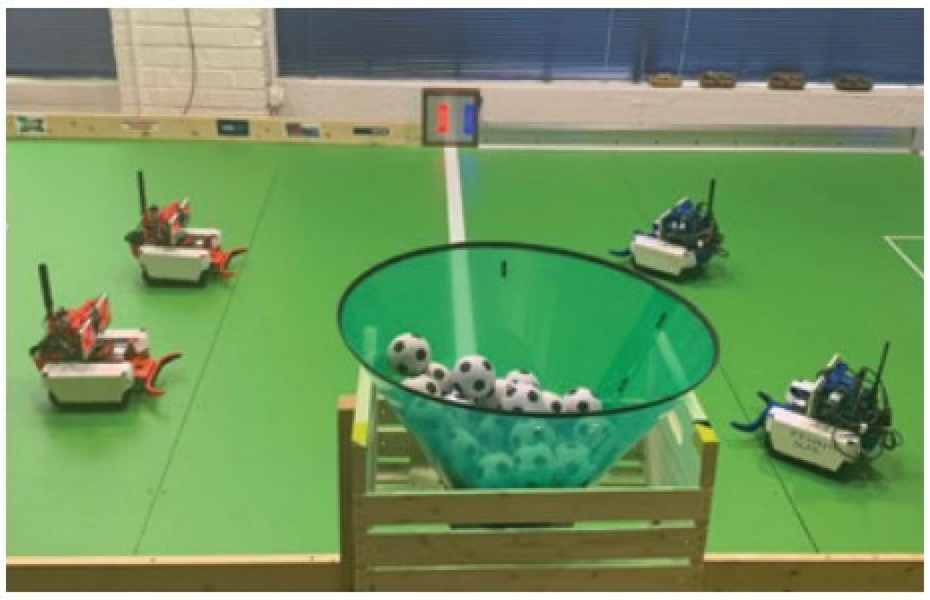
Mika and his team's original ideas involved using remote-controlled miniature tanks and having players shoot at each other. However, due to practical limitations, they eventually settled on letting players join in on two-on-two soccer games played using 3D printed tanks. The team experimented with off-the-shelf RC cars, but eventually realized they'd have to build their own tech from scratch.

"We teamed up with Adam Savage's team at Tested to build these really advanced remote-controlled tanks," Mika says. "We're on what we call the Mark III now, and we have all of these things hooked up to a PC at Mixer that automates everything. Even things like goaltending are managed by the computer, so if someone goaltends we can take control of their tank and drive them to a penalty area. We went into this thing thinking it would be easy, but now we're doing some of the same stuff that people are doing to build autopiloting cars."

Now that Mika's team has proven their tech works, they want to continue to expand on the project and create a new idea. In the coming months, the team plans to listen to player feedback as it iterates. If the community desires, Mika says they can easily add more tanks and introduce new environments and new game types. Mika also dreams they might create some escape room-like scenarios where players can use their tanks to navigate physical mirror mazes, solve laser puzzles, and interact with other uniquely crafted sequences.

"We can actually do augmented reality with this," Mika says. "Our original plan was like a first-person shooter with remote-controlled tanks, but the bullets wouldn't be real. We'd augment the camera view with virtual bullets. We could go back to that concept. We can add fake damage on tanks, we could have one of the treads slow down like it's damaged … we could also throw virtual oil slicks or turbo boosts onto the field and see how players deal with that."

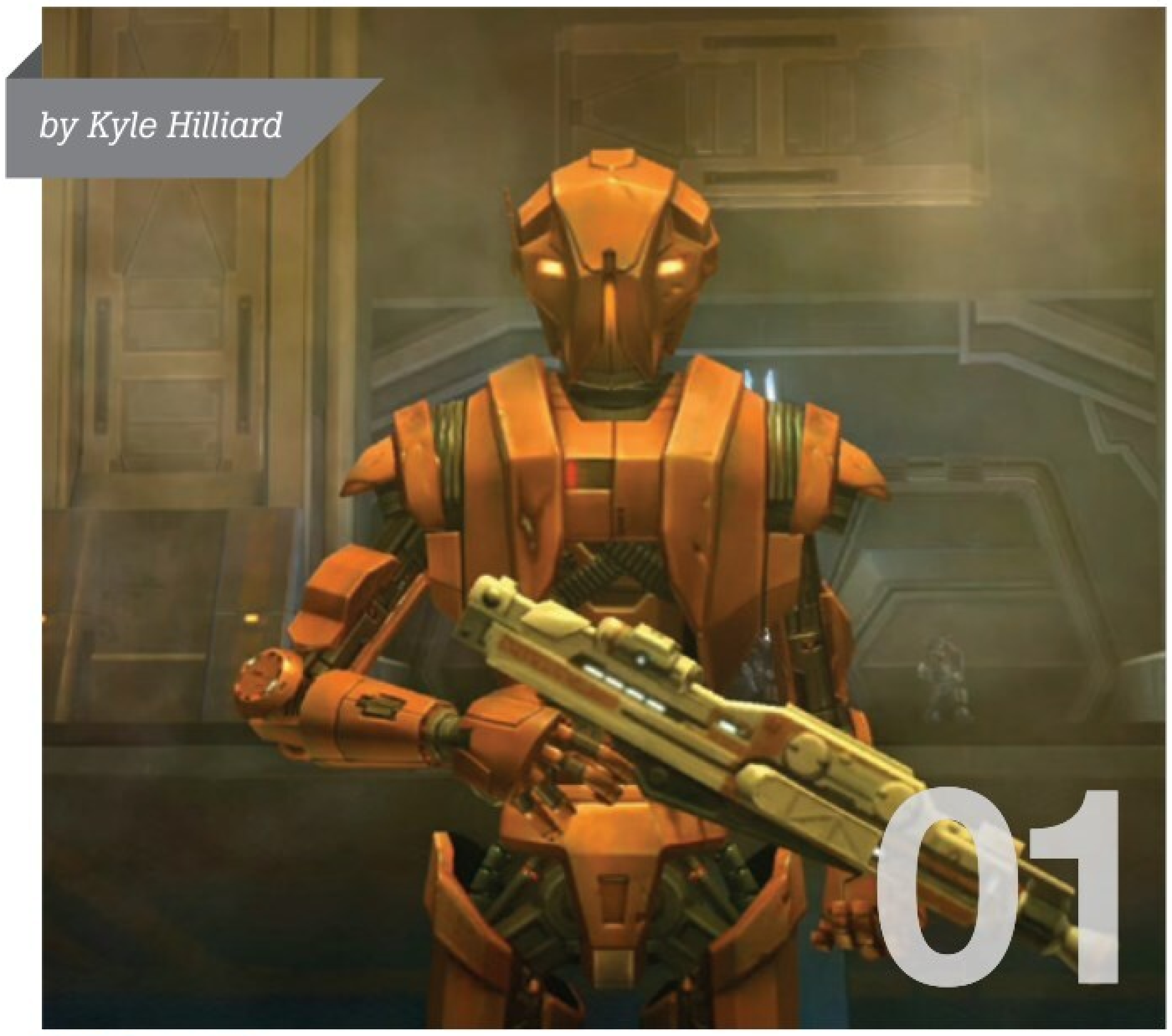
Mike and Tested recently launched Project Tankball on Mixer. People can jump in and play for free on Xbox One, PC, and mobile devices via the Mixer app, and then offer their feedback. Much like #IDARB, Project Tankball could evolve a lot over the coming months. The team even jokes around about expanding the project to use real tanks and real flamethrowers in the future. "If someone wanted to drop a lot of money, we don't mind destroying our play field with pyrotechnics," Mika jokes. "We don't know the answer to what this is yet, but we think people are interested in it and we want to see how far we can push it." ◈



top ten

STAR WARS VIDEO GAME CHARACTERS

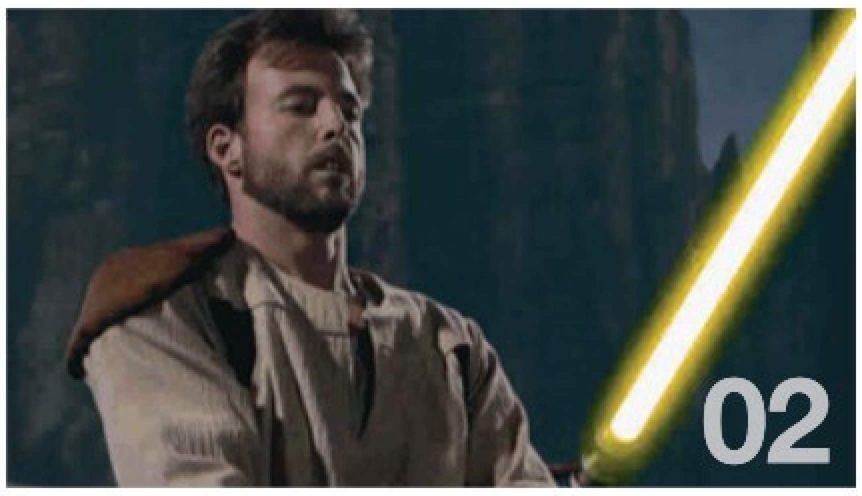
by Kyle Hilliard



HK-47

Knights of the Old Republic

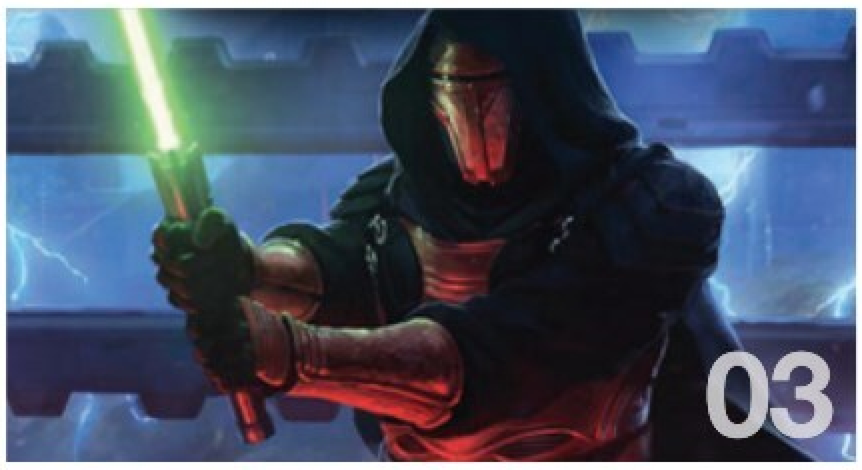
The Star Wars expanded universe was stamped non-canon with the Disney takeover, but that doesn't mean we're not fond of the characters introduced in video games, and our favorite is HK-47. With his robotic speech and surprising history, this assassin droid proved to be the most memorable character in a game full of great ones.



Kyle Katarn

Dark Forces

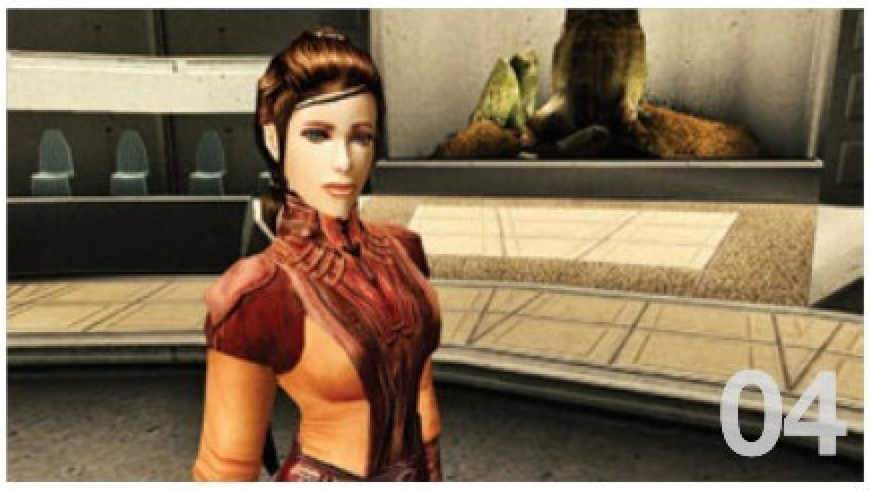
A self-taught Jedi with the galaxy's greatest first name, Katarn was invaluable to the Rebellion's efforts. A former Stormtrooper, Katarn helped steal the Death Star's plans (which lead to its destruction), and later became a Jedi teacher alongside Luke Skywalker.



Revan

Knights of the Old Republic

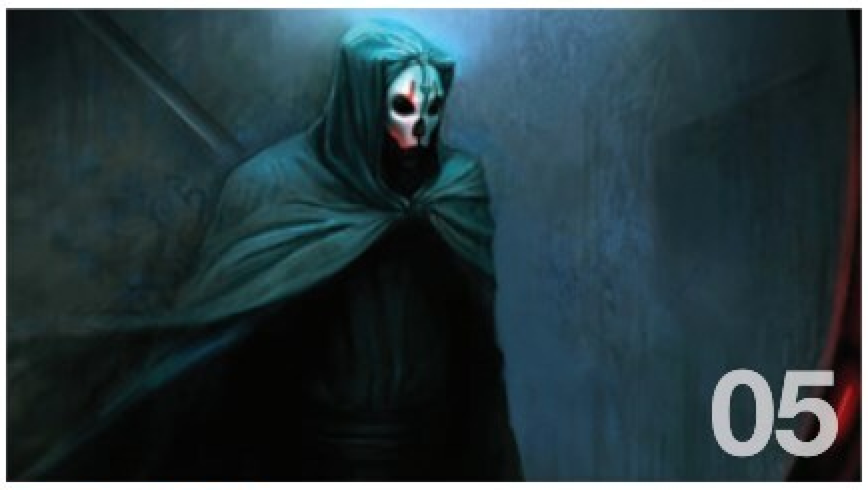
There is a reason KOTOR's cast makes up so much of this list: it has some of the best characters and narrative of any non-mainline Star Wars story. Revan is a mysterious Sith Lord whose apprentice is running amok in the galaxy, and your ties to him are closer than you realize.



Bastila Shan

Knights of the Old Republic

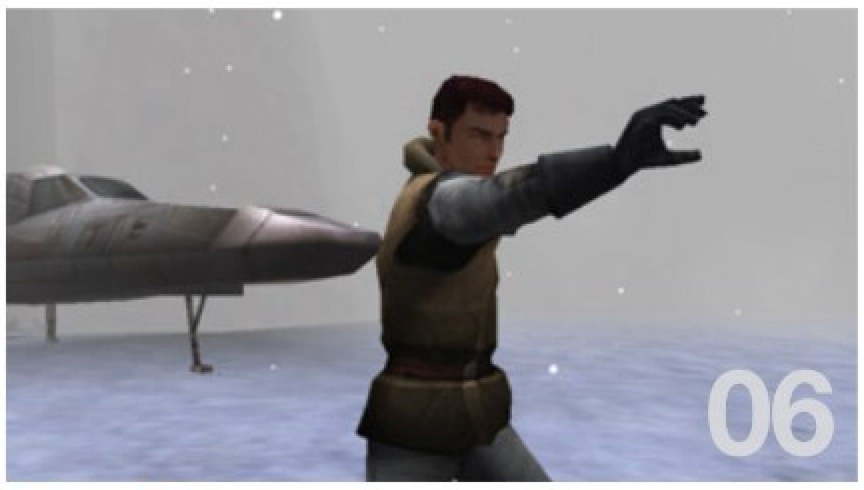
Shan is a powerful Jedi who defeated Revan before KOTOR's events kick off, but she is not immune to the temptations of the dark side. Star Wars is so often about good versus evil without much gray area, making her an especially interesting and dynamic character.



Darth Nihilus

Knights of the Old Republic II: The Sith Lords

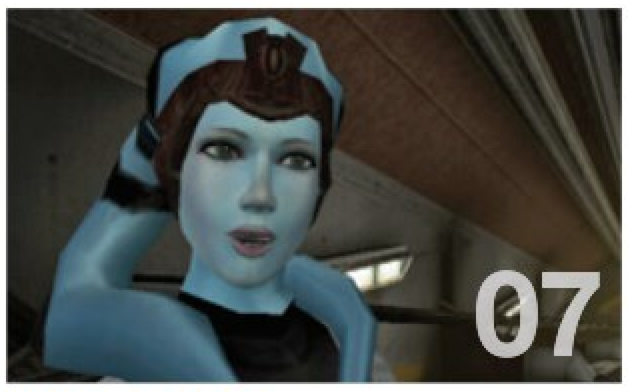
Nihilus is the antagonist of KOTOR's sequel, and he is appropriately intimidating with twisted motives and abilities, but our favorite thing about him is his design. Just imagine how you'd feel if you confronted that mask in a dark hallway bathed in the glow of a red lightsaber.



Jaden Korr

Jedi Knight: Jedi Academy

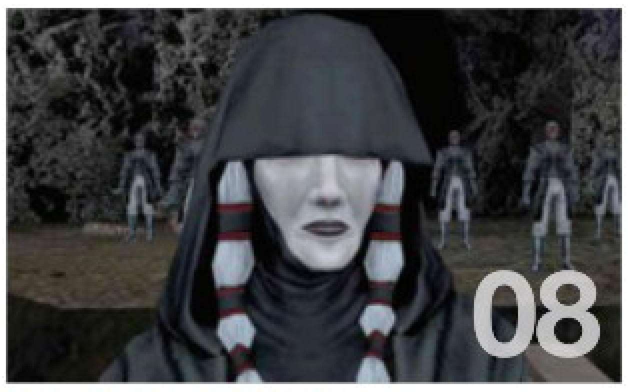
Korr lost his adoptive parents when he was young and was raised by his uncle. Without any Jedi training, he built a purple lightsaber with spare parts. That lead to his enrollment in Luke Skywalker's Jedi Academy, where he proved to be a skilled but outspoken student.



Mission Vao

Knights of the Old Republic

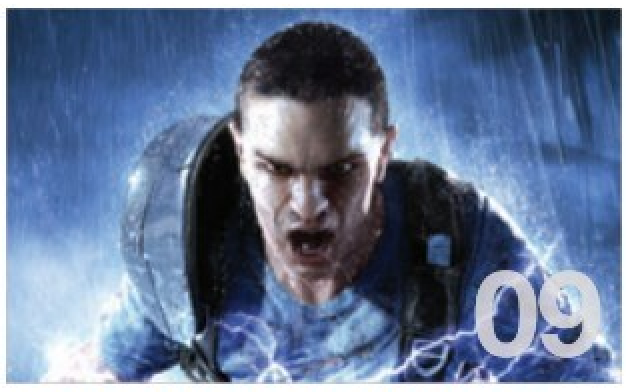
Mission Vao is a resourceful Twi'lek who grew up on the streets of the city planet Taris. She is best friends with a Wookie, giving her a real Han Solo vibe. She also has no fear when it comes to insulting her enemies to their face, even when they are threatening torture.



Darth Traya/Kreia

Knights of the Old Republic II: The Sith Lords

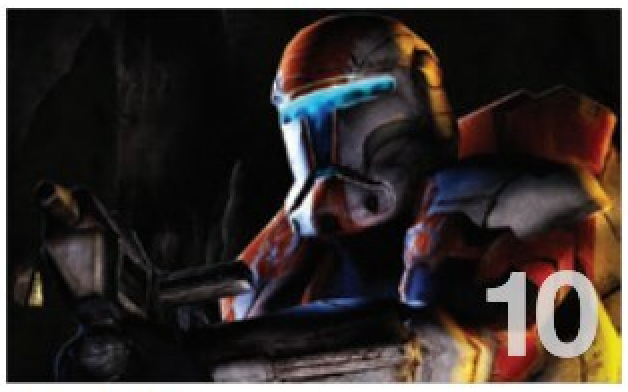
Traya began her studies of the force without the Darth prefix. She achieved the title of Jedi Master before changing sides, making her particularly skilled as she saw and mastered both sides of the Force. She is a powerful manipulator, but still has some light in her.



Galen "Starkiller" Marek

The Force Unleashed

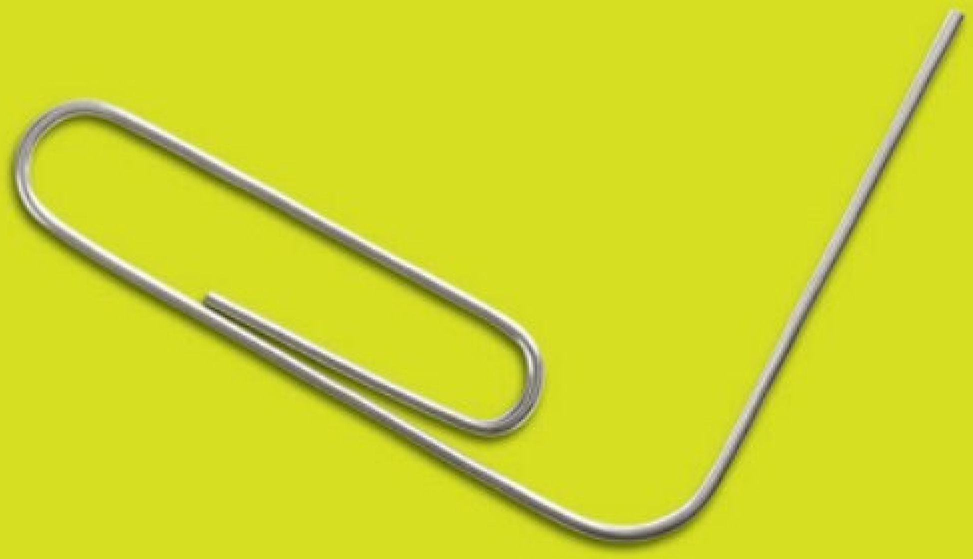
It's arguably preposterous that Vader had a secret apprentice while being a student himself to the Emperor in the years leading up to A New Hope, but Marek's characterization and journey in The Force Unleashed is an engaging one that is well performed by actor Sam Witwer.



RC-1138

Republic Commando

Known colloquially as "Boss," RC-1138 leads an elite squad of clone troopers to perform various questionable missions across the galaxy. Along with being the best among his clone trooper kind, he's also a good leader and has insightful things to say about nearly every gun. ◆



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July2019

GAME RELEASES

Tuesday 02
- Final Fantasy XIV: Shadowbringers (PS4, PC)
- Red Faction: Guerrilla Re-Mars-tered Edition (Switch)

Thursday 04
- Stranger Things 3: The Game (PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC)

Friday 05
- Attack on Titan 2: Final Battle (PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC)

Friday 12
- Dragon Quest Builders 2 (PS4, Switch)

Friday 19
- Marvel Ultimate Alliance 3: The Black Order (Switch)

Thursday 25
- AI: The Somnium Files (PS4, Switch, PC)
- Kill La Kill – IF (PS4, Switch, PC)

Friday 26
- Fire Emblem: Three Houses (Switch) ❶
- Wolfenstein: Youngblood (PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC)

MOVIE & TV PREMIERES

Tuesday 02
- Young Justice: Outsiders (DC Universe)

Thursday 04
- Stranger Things (Netflix)

Friday 05
- Spider-Man: Far From Home (theaters)

Thursday 11
- The Outpost (CW)

Friday 12
- Crawl (theaters)
- Stuber (theaters)

Friday 19
- The Lion King (theaters) ❷

Friday 26
- The Boys (Amazon)
- Once Upon a Time In Hollywood (theaters)
- Veronica Mars (Hulu)

Sunday 28
- Pennyworth (Epix)

GAMER CULTURE

Monday 01

Marvels Returns ❸

Alex Ross and Kurt Busiek are returning to the Marvels story they started in 1994 for a 40-page epilogue. Readers will once again be taken into the life of Phil Sheldon.

Saturday 13

Gaming By Sea

If the idea of playing games on a giant boat sounds fun to you, you can sign up for Gaming by Sea, a six-day cruise set aboard the Carnival Sunshine that sails from Charleston, SC to the Bahamas.

Thursday 18

Comic-Con International: San Diego

Crystal Dynamics' Avengers game is expected to be in the spotlight at this year's Comic-Con. In recent years, this show has become a haven for collectors, who stand in line for hours to snag exclusive items, and for moviegoers, who are often treated to trailers and footage to upcoming films that aren't shown anywhere else.

Thursday 25

QuakeCon

This year's QuakeCon can be attended in two locations: the traditional spot of Dallas and for the first time in London. Along with 24-hour gaming in the BYOC, Bethesda always brings a new game to highlight. Since this year's show is called "Year of Doom," the focus will likely be on Doom: Eternal.

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by Game Informer Staff

AG SF CA
C40
TOURNAMENT READY

Astro C40

PS4/PC Controller

If you're in the market for a high-end PS4 or PC controller, or are sick and tired of torn DualShock analog sticks, then Astro has a great (albeit pricey) solution. The Astro C40 TR bundles high performance, longer battery life, and a number of useful customizable options.

The controller can be dismantled and reassembled quickly, so players can swap the placement of analog sticks and the directional pad. Astro offers a variety of analog stick forms and heights in the box, which are equally simple to swap. You can also adjust analog stick and trigger sensitivity, the glow of the tiny LED light, the amount of rumble, and even equalize the sound delivered to the headphones. The backside UL and UR buttons can be customized to any button input, which is incredibly useful for games that have actions mapped to the d-pad or for moving the e-brake in racing games (which is usually a face button).

The C40 is expensive, but despite some minor quirks, we didn't want to go back to the standard DualShock. The more crowded PC market has a number of great options, but the C40 is still a hell of a controller that will get the job done and elevate your gaming if you take advantage of its customizable features.

VERY GOOD ■■■■■■■■□□

$199 | astrogaming.com

1
8BitDo M30

1 Analogue Mega Sg Retro Sega Genesis Console

Analogue has finally given Sega fans the machine they deserve. With the Mega Sg, Genesis fans can enjoy their favorite classics in 1080p via HDMI. We tested a variety of games, and the machine played them all beautifully – even contemporary homebrew creations like Pier Solar and the Great Architects. The machine supports optional wireless 8BitDo controllers, or you can use an original wired Genesis controllers if you still have them laying around. However you choose to play, the Mega Sg makes it easy to enjoy your Genesis library with crisper visuals.

SUPERB ■■■■■■■■■□

$189 | analogue.co/mega-sg

2 The Lord of the Rings: Journeys in Middle-earth

Take up your sword, axe, or bow, and join characters like Bilbo and Aragorn as they set out in this fully cooperative and app-driven board game. Gorgeous fantasy art, detailed minis, and a modular board bring life to the story as the free app governs monsters, inventory, and all the other heavy lifting, letting you focus on the adventure at hand.

$99.95 | fantasyflightgames.com

2
Select Heroes
Aragorn
Beravor
Bilbo
Elena
Aragorn

3 Hack Laptop

Parents who want to help their kids learn about computer programming face an overwhelming array of books, kits, and after-school programs. The Hack Laptop stands apart, giving kids not only practical (and fun) lessons, but also hardware they won't quickly outgrow. Monthly episodes ease kids from basics like changing their cursor icon and display font to eventually learning Javascript basics and app development. Kids can learn at their own pace, and a dedicated "hack" button encourages them to look under the hood and see how the included games work – even tweaking them on the fly. Better still, it's a fully functional ASUS laptop running Linux, so they can do their homework or other normal computing tasks when they're not taking on episodic missions. If you like the idea but don't need another computer in the house, a $40 USB version is available for Windows 10 machines, too.

VERY GOOD ■■■■■■■■□□

$299 | hack-computer.com

HEROES OF BALDUR'S GATE
ROY THOMAS
STAN LEE
STORY
Us

***HEROES OF BALDUR'S GATE* BY JAMES OHLEN & JESSE SKY**

Join familiar heroes from the beloved Baldur's Gate video game series in this richly imagined new adventure for 5th edition Dungeons & Dragons, featuring over 160 color pages full of illustrations and statistics on one of our favorite virtual worlds.

$44.95 (hardcover)
$19.95 (digital)
dmsguild.com

***THE STAN LEE STORY XXL* BY ROY THOMAS**

These days, it's hard to turn around without bumping into a pop culture icon that Stan Lee didn't touch. This giant-sized extravaganza – which took nearly a decade to compile – celebrates the comic book luminary, detailing his childhood in Depression-era New York and his transformational run at the helm of Marvel comics.

$200
taschen.com

US

Academy Award winner Jordan Peele's follow up to *Get Out* is an intense, mind-bending thriller about a family that gets attacked by duplicates of themselves. Peele's clever social commentary surprises and entertains until the closing credits.

$19.99
usmovie.com

Oculus Quest

The next step for VR

Oculus Quest is the virtual-reality headset I've been waiting for. All of the hardware is built into the headset, meaning you don't need a computer, phone, or console to run it. You also don't have to worry about tripping over cables, since it isn't tethered to anything and is entirely wire-free. Setup is easy and you can start playing games within just minutes of removing the headset and controllers from the box. It's basically virtual reality's equivalent of the console experience, and it comes packing a hefty library of games.

by Andrew Reiner

Virtual reality is still in its infancy, and while it's great that companies like Oculus, Samsung, and Valve continue to make significant breakthroughs in hardware and games, a new headset is almost obsolete by the time it launches. Oculus just released the Go, and now here's the Quest, which is releasing on the same day as the cable-connected Rift S (an option we have yet to get our hands on). The Rift S and Quest hit on May 21.

Even if you already have a nice VR setup, or want to adopt to the most powerful solution, which the Quest is not, its mobility makes it attractive. You can wear this thing almost anywhere, as long as you have roughly seven feet of clear space around you for the room-scale experience (or four feet if you want to sit).

When you boot up the Quest, the passthrough cameras give you a good look at your surroundings, and your first task is to create your play space, which Oculus calls the "Guardian" boundary. Using one of the controllers, you simply point at the floor and draw a ring or square around you. I started out making a relatively tight ring around me in my office, but was able to create a huge play space of roughly 20 feet in larger areas (and even in my backyard). Once a suitable area is determined, you're ready to play games, watch movies, Chromecast stream, or do whatever it is you want to in VR. All of the games must be downloaded from Oculus' store, however.

If you are near the perimeter you established, you'll see a blue wireframe alerting you of the safety zone. If you break the perimeter, the grid turns red, alerting you to back up a bit. If you spend too much time outside of the boundary, the passthrough cameras come to life to show you where you are, and a message will eventually appear telling you to remove the headset. Thanks to these safety parameters, I never once collided with anything I didn't want to. Nothing was broken.

The Quest is launching with 50-plus games that offer six degrees of freedom, and are powered by the Snapdragon 835 processor with 4GB of RAM. The headset, which features OLED lenses with 1440x1600 resolution for each eye, is joined by two Touch controllers you can see visually when the headset is on. The resolution still isn't at the crystal clear quality we want, and is mostly noticeable in text, which can pixelate at a distance.

The controllers are similar in design to the Rift's Touch controllers, but the tracking rings now face upward, a change that was made to improve the tracking made by the sensors on the headset. I ran the battery dry three times during my tests of various games. The average battery life appears to be about two and a half to three hours.

I found the headset to be comfortable, outside of the somewhat odd pull of the weight from the screen, which is a problem with every VR option out there. The padding around the lenses is a nice touch, and the strap placement is easy to find when adjusting the fit blindly with the headset on.

The Quest's launch lineup of games plays out a little bit like a highlight reel of VR gaming, offering older experiences like Superhot, Beat Saber, Moss, and Angry Birds VR: Isle of the Pigs, but there are also some new experiences designed exclusively for the Quest such as the competitive shooter Dead and Buried II. Odds are, most games coming to the Rift in the future will also head to Quest, but nothing is guaranteed.

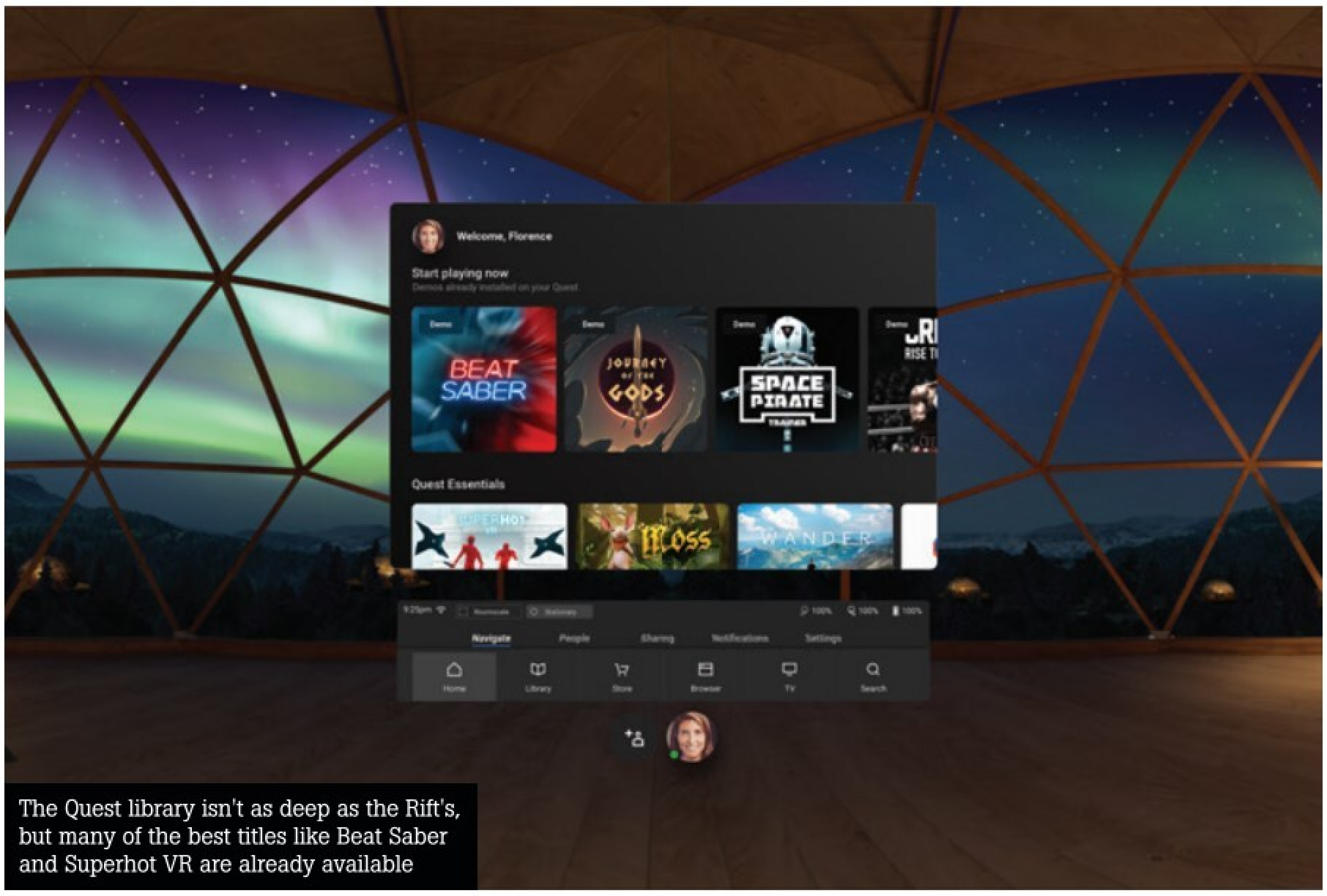
Superhot and Beat Saber are immediate standouts on the Quest, not just since they are great games, but in showing just how precise the motion tracking is. I felt like my motions were all landing perfectly. I did run into the occasional moment where the headset would lose tracking of a controller, but only for a split second, and then it would rematerialize and I'd be back in the groove of playing. I used a combination of analog stick movement and room-scale movement in Journey of the Gods, and didn't have any issues at all, and also used warping in Apex Construct to move around a sprawling 3D space and it worked well. I found the built-in speakers did the trick, although if you use them, everyone around you can hear what you do. You can always plug in headphones to isolate the sound, but that adds a wire to the equation.

Apex did have a little bit of chop to it during an elevator sequence, which brings into question the overall performance of the machine – not so much for the launch lineup, but for the games that come in the months and years ahead. Yes, it's plenty powerful, but the hardware can't be upgraded like a typical PC rig, again drawing a parallel to console gaming. How long will it be supported? That's not an answer we'll know any time soon, but I have a feeling Oculus will keep this great VR experience in its sights as long as people are playing it.

Along with the headset and controller, the box comes with a frame spacer for people who wear glasses (co-workers who wear glasses said the experience was indeed comfortable), two AA batteries for the controllers (these didn't even come close to losing juice), and a 15W USB-C power adapter for the headset. The $399 entry price point is a bit intimidating, but I think it's a steal for what the Quest has to offer out of the gate. You can also get a slightly beefier 128 GB model for $499. The mobility and ease of setup make it a game changer in the world of VR. This is the VR option made for the masses, and Oculus knocked it out of the park.

SUPERB ■■■■■■■■■□

$399 (64GB), $499 (128GB) | oculus.com/quest



The Quest library isn't as deep as the Rift's, but many of the best titles like Beat Saber and Superhot VR are already available

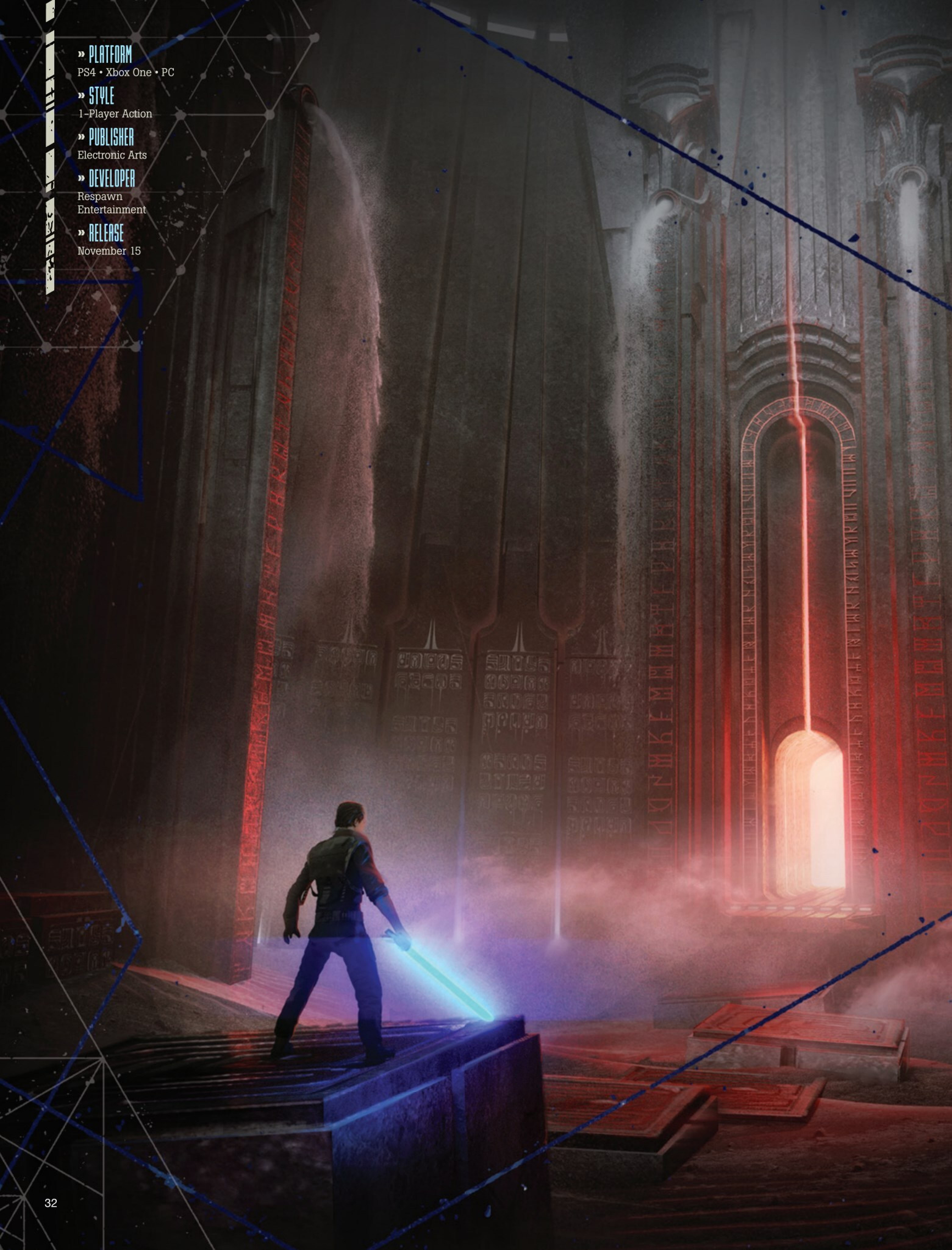
» PLATFORM
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

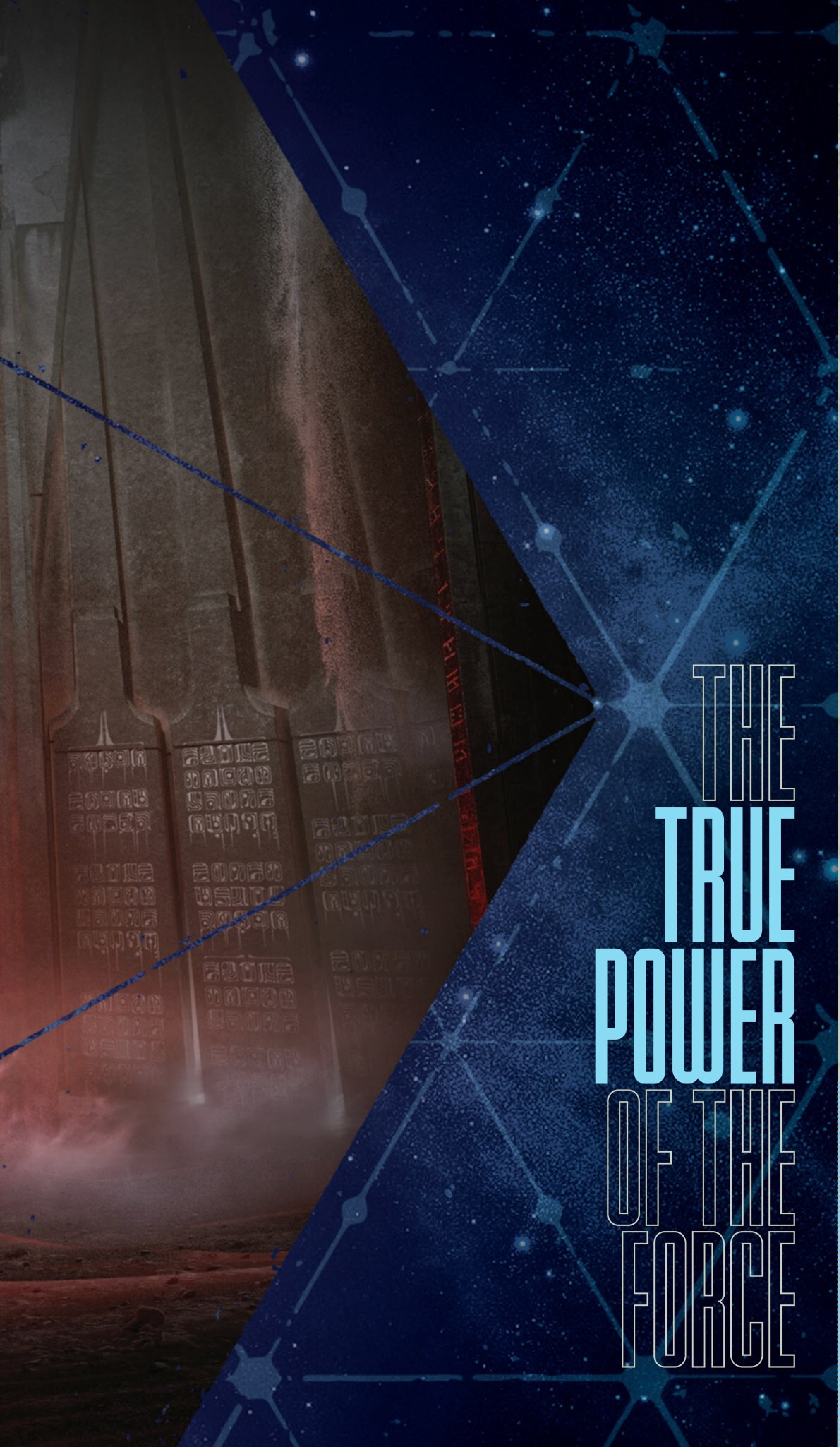
» STYLE
1-Player Action

» PUBLISHER
Electronic Arts

» DEVELOPER
Respawn
Entertainment

» RELEASE
November 15





THE TRUE POWER OF THE FORCE

A HANDS-ON REPORT THAT REVEALS WHY **JEDI: FALLEN ORDER** COULD BE THE STAR WARS GAME FANS HAVE BEEN WAITING FOR

BY
ANDREW REINER

ON MAY 25, 1977, STAR WARS OPENED IN CINEMAS

AND INTRODUCED US TO A DISTANT GALAXY FILLED WITH WIZARDS WIELDING LIGHT SWORDS, SPACE STATIONS THE SIZE OF MOONS, AND MORE ALIENS AND ROBOTS THAN SCIENTISTS COULD POSSIBLY STUDY IN A LIFETIME. IT WAS THE PINNACLE OF SCIENCE-FICTION ESCAPISM THAT ALSO TOUCHED US WITH A STORY FILLED WITH RELATABLE CHARACTERS WE COULDN'T HELP BUT ROOT FOR. A GOOD NUMBER OF THEATERGOERS WHO WERE THERE ON DAY ONE NEVER CAME BACK FROM THAT MAGICAL OUTING - THEY WERE TRANSFORMED INTO FANS FOR LIFE.

JEDI: FALLEN ORDER IS A SINGLE-PLAYER GAME THAT WON'T HAVE ANY MICROTRANSACTIONS OR ADDITIONAL MULTIPLAYER MODES

After 40 years of cinematic magic, Star Wars' stories are proving to be timeless. The big revelations and heartfelt moments from these films still resonate today and have become generational. Some of us grew up fearing the wrath of Darth Vader. The next generation got to know him as a young pod-racing star named Anakin Skywalker. And Vader is merely a legend for the newest batch of fans.

Story is everything for Star Wars, but that hasn't been the case for most Star Wars video games. Since Star Wars' inception, game developers have latched on to the clashing of lightsabers and hails of laser fire, not the mythology or stories. Sure, we grew quite fond of Kyle Katarn in the Dark Forces series, and were blown away by Darth Revan's secrets in Knights of the Old Republic, but most Star Wars games are defined by their action and battles. Even Force Unleashed's Starkiller, who was conflicted between the light and dark, ended up as a gray enigma and mostly a tool of destruction on the battlefield. Focusing on action is the right thing to do for interactive entertainment, but why haven't we seen a game deliver everything that makes Star Wars tick? Why can't a meaningful story be just as prominent as the action? KOTOR delivered story, but not the action or cinematic finesse. Despite dozens of attempts across 36 years, no game has successfully blended all of the Star Wars elements together.

That's precisely what Respawn Entertainment could achieve with Jedi: Fallen Order, a single-player game that weaves almost everything we've come to love about Star Wars into the framework of a sprawling adventure. From the coming-of-age story of a down-on-his-luck character to how the orchestrated score becomes playful for a humorous moment, the ebb and flow of what we love about Star Wars appears to be strong in this game.

I spent two days at Respawn's Los Angeles studio playing the game and discussing its design with the development team. In my play session and the footage that was shown to me, the spirit of the Star Wars movies is front and center – a driving force that delivers a continual sense of awe in its visuals and sound. At the same time, the Star Wars appeal doesn't steal away from the gameplay and adventure, which are both equally exciting in ways I didn't expect. Although Electronic Arts' marketing teases the message "don't stand out" for a game about a Jedi on the run, it isn't a stealth game, and the player won't be forced to duck into shadows or sneak behind enemies.

The lightsaber ends up doing most of the talking in Jedi: Fallen Order, but it isn't used in the way you would think. You won't be swinging it wildly at swarms of enemies, or even in lengthy combo sequences against just one enemy. The team's vision for the lightsaber action stems from the words "thoughtful combat," which equates to the player strategizing and looking for openings where the saber can be the most lethal. In a way, the combat dance is reminiscent of From Software's Souls games, but not in a punishing way. Respawn wants players to succeed, but not without a little effort. The Force is also used to augment combat, allowing the player to mess with enemies in satisfying, clever, and powerful ways.

When the saber is sheathed, Respawn's vision for the adventure has classic gaming roots and is inspired heavily by the Metroid series, pushing players to freely explore worlds, and come back to them later with new powers that can be used to reach different areas. Never once do players see a waypoint on the screen telling them where their next objective is. Respawn doesn't want to hold your hand, and instead hopes you plot your own path through dangerous worlds that are teeming with just as much hostile wildlife as heavily armed Imperial Forces.

HOPE IN THE DARKNESS

Set years after the events of *Revenge of the Sith*, Jedi: Fallen Order gives us an intimate look at one of the galaxy's darkest periods in which the Jedi are being hunted and slaughtered. We see this culling through the eyes of a mysterious padawan learner who is on the run and desperate to find his place in the galaxy, perhaps as the next great Jedi Knight who can revive the Jedi order.

The game begins on the planet Bracca, a Mid-Rim world the Empire uses as a shipyard where derelict starships are dismantled and harvested for parts. “They're tearing down these old Republic vessels, which is symbolic to the Fallen Order,” says Stig Asmussen, Jedi: Fallen Order's director, who also directed God of War 3.

One of the low-level workers of the Empire's dangerous operation is a human named Cal Kestis, a padawan in hiding doing his best to blend with society and not get noticed. During the heart of the Clone Wars, Cal was learning the ways of the Force. Asmussen says he may have gone on a few missions, but he wasn't sent out by the Order like Anakin and Obi-Wan to deal with major issues. In the aftermath of Chancellor Palpatine's Order 66 (which decrees all Jedi are enemies of the Republic), Cal's entire life was turned upside down, and he had to abandon everything he knew, turning from a purveyor of hope to an enemy of the state.

Respawn doesn't want to say much about Cal or his history, implying he could be someone significant. But unlike Rey's origin story in *The Force Awakens*, which created more questions than answers, Cal's origin is revealed as the game unfolds. Players won't be left hanging waiting for a sequel to fill in the gaps.

These revelations aren't delivered in flashbacks, but instead are learned as the game moves forward; Respawn wants to deliver as much story as possible in real-time as the player still controls Cal. Some slower or more impactful moments are handled in cutscenes, but most of the narrative sequences don't disrupt gameplay and are woven into the action.

Cal (who is brought to life by Cameron Monaghan) managed to stay hidden on Bracca for years, but ends up being outed through an event Respawn again doesn't want to reveal. Someone on the wrong side learns he's with the Jedi within minutes of the game's beginning, and the player is suddenly hunted by the Empire. It doesn't sound like there is much of a grace period to explore Bracca early on. As stormtroopers and the Emperor's finest hunters are called in to execute Cal, he finds help from an unexpected source.

THE SOUNDTRACK IS FULLY ORCHESTRATED AND FEATURES THE TALENTS OF RESPAWN'S NICK LAVIERS, STEPHEN BARTON, AND COMPOSER GORDY HAAB, WHO RECORDED THE MUSIC AT ABBEY ROAD

“He comes in contact with a mysterious lady, a former Jedi Knight named Cere (played by Debra Wilson) who thinks she has a shot at restoring the Jedi Order,” Asmussen says. “Cal is skeptical of the mission, and unsure of the Jedi Order, but he believes in survival. She makes a pact with him: ‘If you help me out, I'll help you finish your Jedi training.’ For him, that's incredibly enticing, since he needs all the tools he can to survive.”

While Cal is uncertain of Cere's ambitions at first, he quickly starts to believe in both her and the chance of resurrecting the Order. From what we know, during this period of the Emperor's rise to power, most of the Jedi have gone into hiding or are dead. After years of war, the galaxy is at a point of acceptance with the Empire's directive. Worlds are looking for a faction to rise up and reestablish control. Many of them willfully accept the help of the Empire and turn a blind eye on the highly trained weapons it sends in, like Darth Vader and the Inquisitorious group to eradicate the Jedi.

Could Cere know the location of a large group of lost Jedi? Again, Respawn wants to keep the story under lock and key, but whatever Cere knows becomes the game's McGuffin to a degree. Cere is a constant in Cal's life, but she won't be with him on the battlefield. Cal is sent on missions while Cere handles reconnaissance.

Cal instead develops a tightknit friendship with a small droid named BD-1 (see page 38). Much like a boy and his dog, Cal and BD are inseparable. While BD can freely walk around on the terrain on his little AT-ST-like legs, he mostly sits on Cal's back, which of course expedites traversal and exploration.

This small crew ends up being dangerous cargo aboard a ship called *The Stinger Mantis*, a new vessel type Respawn and Lucasfilm created for the game. Star Wars artist Doug Chiang helped bring this unique ship to life. *The Stinger Mantis* is long and surprisingly slender, with a fuselage looking somewhat like a commercial airliner you can ride on today. The ship's exterior is blue and silver (but can be customized by the player), and the interior is darkly lit with orange and black hues on the seats and walls. Living quarters are in the back and a small lounge is in the center, as is a galactic map that the player can interact with. The ship has one large wing jetting up like a dorsal fin. It also has a small turbine that can rotate with the wing for various flight needs. The engines on the backside burn blue when taking off.

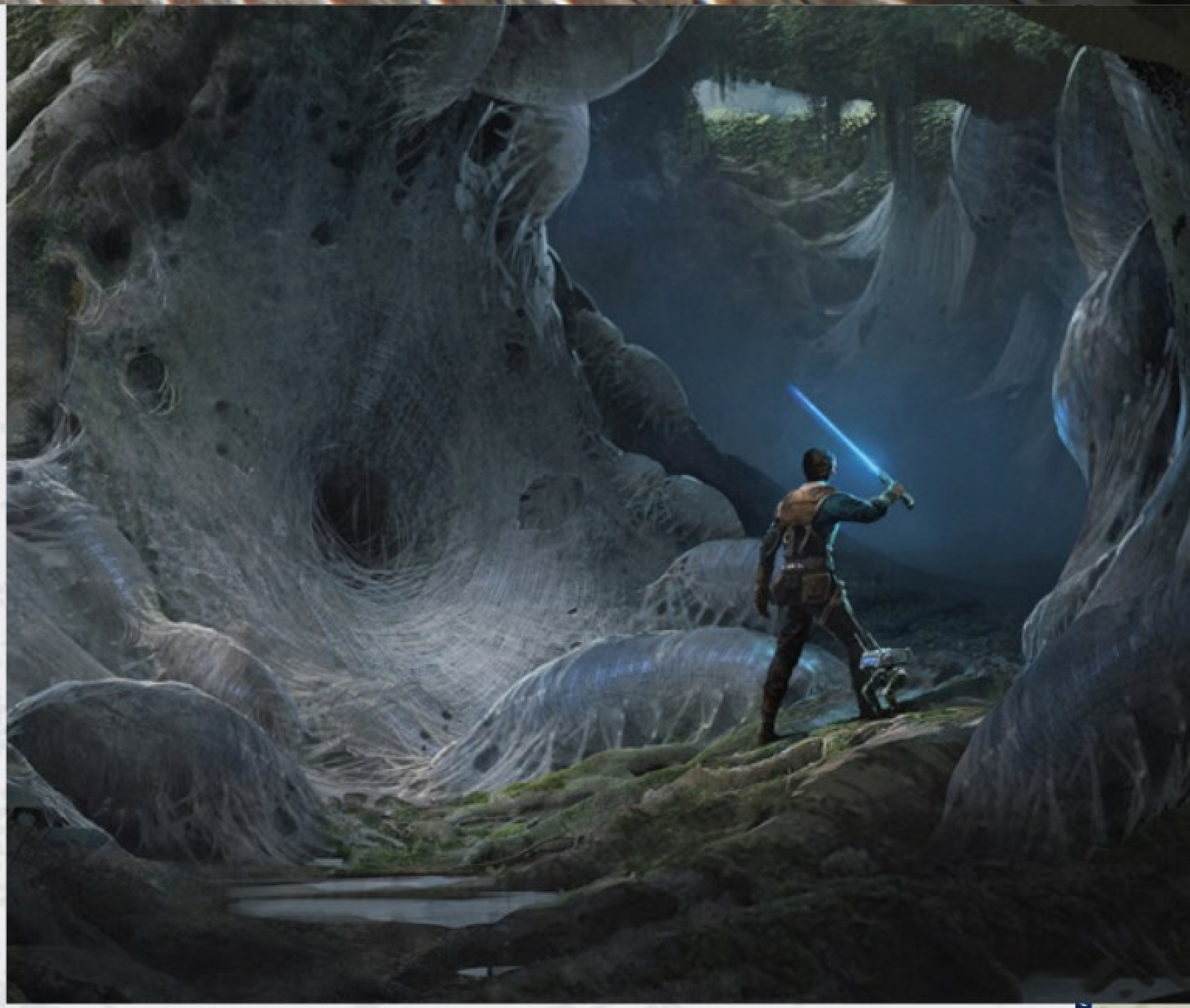
This unique vessel is helmed by the equally unique captain Greez Dritus, who is part of a stout alien species that is another new canonical creation made by Respawn and Lucasfilm. “Greez's inspiration was John C. Reilly and Mr. Furley from *Three's Company*,” Asmussen says with a laugh.

Greez speaks English with a bit of a hoarseness to his voice, and has a dry wit. He'd fit right in with the aliens you see grabbing drinks

at Mos Eisley Cantina. He walks on two legs, has four arms, bat-like facial features, somewhat dangerous-looking pointy teeth, yet ends up looking somewhat comical with his gray fur and long white sideburns. He wears a red flight jacket with white racing stripes, and has a customized cockpit aboard *The Stinger Mantis* that accommodates his four arms. Cal sits in the co-pilot seat to his right, and Cere is behind them in the communications seat.

Greez willfully transports this small group of characters to any planet at any time – both to progress the story and for freeform backtracking. We don't know how many worlds there are yet, but the concept art and clips from the trailer hint at a good number of them. Asmussen says the ratio of established Star Wars planets and new planets original to Jedi: Fallen Order is about half and half. Each world houses a hub where the ship lands. Here, the player can return to rest up, save, apply skill points, and spark conversations with characters to learn more about them, the worlds, and overall story. The ship also offers other activities Respawn doesn't want to reveal just yet.

When players choose a new destination, the flight is handled in real-time, meaning there won't be any load screens, giving the player time to engage with the different activities on the ship. Along with Bracca, the quest to restore the Jedi Order takes Cal to Kashyyyk, the wookiee homeworld.



RISE OF THE EMPIRE

Kashyyyk was one of the battlegrounds that defined the Clone Wars. In *Revenge of the Sith*, Yoda and the wookiees led the Grand Army of the Republic to victory over the Separatists, but the celebration didn't last long. In the wake of this brief moment of peace, the Empire rose, the wookiees were enslaved, and their world was blockaded and scraped for resources.

Jedi: Fallen Order gives players an intimate look at Kashyyyk as it is being devastated by the Empire. The invading army is not subtle in its intent. As vehicles and troops lay waste to the wildlife and its wookiee defenders, huge refineries are constructed to drain the sap from the trees and harvest the other valuable resources from the land. The melding of wilderness and ridged steel delivers a powerful message on its own, but players also see the operation in full effect.

Cal and Cere's mission takes them to Kashyyyk to meet with Tarfful, a wookiee chieftain who played a pivotal role in defending his people during the Separatist attack. Cal's arrival on Kashyyyk is not landing in a hangar or launch pad, but rather we catch up with him rising out of the water with BD-1. BD's head pops to the surface similarly to R2-D2 lifting his periscope from the swamp on Dagobah. BD playfully chirps as he scans the surroundings. Cal isn't far behind, rising a bit more cautiously than his little friend.

Ships locked in battle roar overhead, and two AT-ATs lumber through the water not too far in front of Cal and BD. The walkers open fire on something that is blanketed in fog. These titans appear to have been on a long journey through the depths of the river, as their angular metal frames have picked up long strands of kelp and splotches of mud.

Cal and BD swim alongside the walkers, slowly at first. The music that kicks in during this moment is uniquely orchestrated, but cleverly hits tones from John Williams' "The Swim to Otoh Gunga" that was used in *The Phantom Menace*. This swimming sequence is as tranquil as it is foreboding, and the player has complete control over it.

Cal and BD see that some of the seaweed on a walker's leg is within reach and latch onto it. BD scampers onto Cal's back, and the duo swiftly climb up the leafy wall, periodically jumping sideways to another batch of seaweed to ascend higher. Cal loses his grip once, and almost falls, but is quick to recover just as laser blasts ping off the metal surface he just occupied. This journey up to the walker's top offers two paths, going around the backside or just under the head. Cal chooses to slide under the head, which is firing blasts and rotating as he climbs under it.

This walker is one of the larger types that debuted in the *Star Wars Rebels* animated series, which draws heavy inspiration from the first AT-AT illustration done by concept artist Ralph McQuarrie. Once reaching the other side of the AT-AT, Cal leaps to its top just as one of Kashyyyk's aerial units lands a direct hit on the stormtrooper manning the AT-AT's rear turret.

The unoccupied gunner seat leads to the inner workings of this metal behemoth, something that hasn't been fully detailed in any

THE SNOOPY CONNECTION

Companion droid BD-1 took over two years to design, a process that had Respawn and Lucasfilm working closely together to figure out his look, personality, sound, and overall functionality both in the game and for the greater Star Wars universe.

One of the starting points came from an appreciation of the bond established between a bird and dog in Charles Schulz's *Snoopy*. BD-1 is, in essence, a hybrid of both Woodstock and Snoopy's personalities. "He's kind of a bird that tweets around, and is also loyal like a dog," says game director Stig Asmussen. BD's antennae basically mimic dog ears, in terms of reacting to sound and situations.

The team knew they wanted to pair Cal with a droid, but didn't know what it should be, and even explored ideas similar to BB-8 from *Force Awakens*. They also thought about giving BD-1 actual lines of dialgoue, but then settled on beeps that produced emotional cues.

BD-1 was given eyes because he's an explorer droid who uses them for scanning. Another function of a BD droid is to help explorers not get lonely or sad, so he can be cheerful or encouraging and express a lot of emotion as a core function to help the person not lose their connection in the world.

The BD droid type is a new creation in Star Wars' canon, but it isn't one-of-a-kind, and is instead rare due to its manufacturer going under long ago.

The final touch in making BD-1 a legitimate piece of Star Wars' lore is enlisting the audio talents of Ben Burtt, a sound designer who has been a part of most of the Star Wars movies, TV shows, and games. He created the voices of Chewbacca, R2-D2, and even Darth Vader's breathing. Burtt created the chirpy voice for BD-1, and works closely with Respawn on all of the droid's audio.

Star Wars project to date. Cal works his way through a darkly lit speeder-bike hangar, sits on one for a few seconds, almost appearing as though he's contemplating taking it for a ride, and then drops off it onto a ramp that leads to a ceiling grate. He lifts it up to sneak a peek inside of the cargo hold. He sees three speeder-bike troopers conversing next to three stormtroopers who are strapped into their seats, yet aren't moving – they're dead, victims of what appears to be laser fire that penetrated the AT-AT's hull.

Cal rises through the gate swiftly, and unsheathes his lightsaber. The troopers are surprisingly quick in response, igniting electroblades before he can engage them. Cal goes on the defensive, and parries a trooper's overhand strike. The clashing of electricity stuns the enemy and makes him stumble. Cal uses this opening to send a quick lightsaber jab through the enemy's side for a one-hit kill. The other troopers are not as prepared as the first. Cal goes on the offensive with two powerful strikes that the trooper deflects, but the next swing is too much for him, and it breaks his block meter (shown just below his health), allowing Cal to deliver another instant kill.

The third trooper takes a step back, almost appearing to fear his attacker. Cal holds his ground and raises his hand to use the Force to knock the trooper against the cockpit door and to the ground. Cal taps into the Force again to dash forward in the blink of an eye and sends his saber through the trooper before he can get up. The flow of this short combat sequence is intense and calculated, drawing more inspiration from From Software's Souls titles than any other Star Wars game to date.

The commotion in the hold didn't alert the two pilots in the cockpit. Cal and BD slide behind their pilot's seats. A prompt appears onscreen to send in BD as a distraction. The droid jumps to life and lands on the terminal between the two pilots, who show confusion for a brief second before Cal slams their helmets together, knocking them out cold. The duo now has control of the walker. BD playfully leaps up onto the dashboard to view the action unfolding outside of the window, and Cal slides into the pilot's seat and grabs the controls. This sequence is again fully controllable, giving players the chance to pilot of one of the Empire's most powerful weapons. Cal directs its fire against the other AT-AT leading the assault and tears it to shreds with guns ablaze. The AT-AT features two attacks: light, high-speed lasers, and more powerful, slower blasts.

The highjacked AT-AT marches forward onto a shore where the Imperials have a small camp and landing platforms set up. The AT-ATs fire devastates everything it hits. One of the complexes even explodes, filling the air with chunks of steel and stormtrooper husks. The grinding of the AT-ATs gears chimes out at a slow rhythmic pace as it continues forward.

In a brief lull of the action, another unexpected guest drops in, this one slamming onto the window right in front of Cal. We see a middle-aged man in green armor who is curious about the occupants of this commandeered Imperial vehicle. It's Saw Gerrera, the Clone Wars veteran who was played by Forest Whitaker in *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*. "Hey. Who are you?" he yells through the window. The voice is immediately recognizable – Whitaker has reprised his role, much like he did in episodes of *Rebels*.

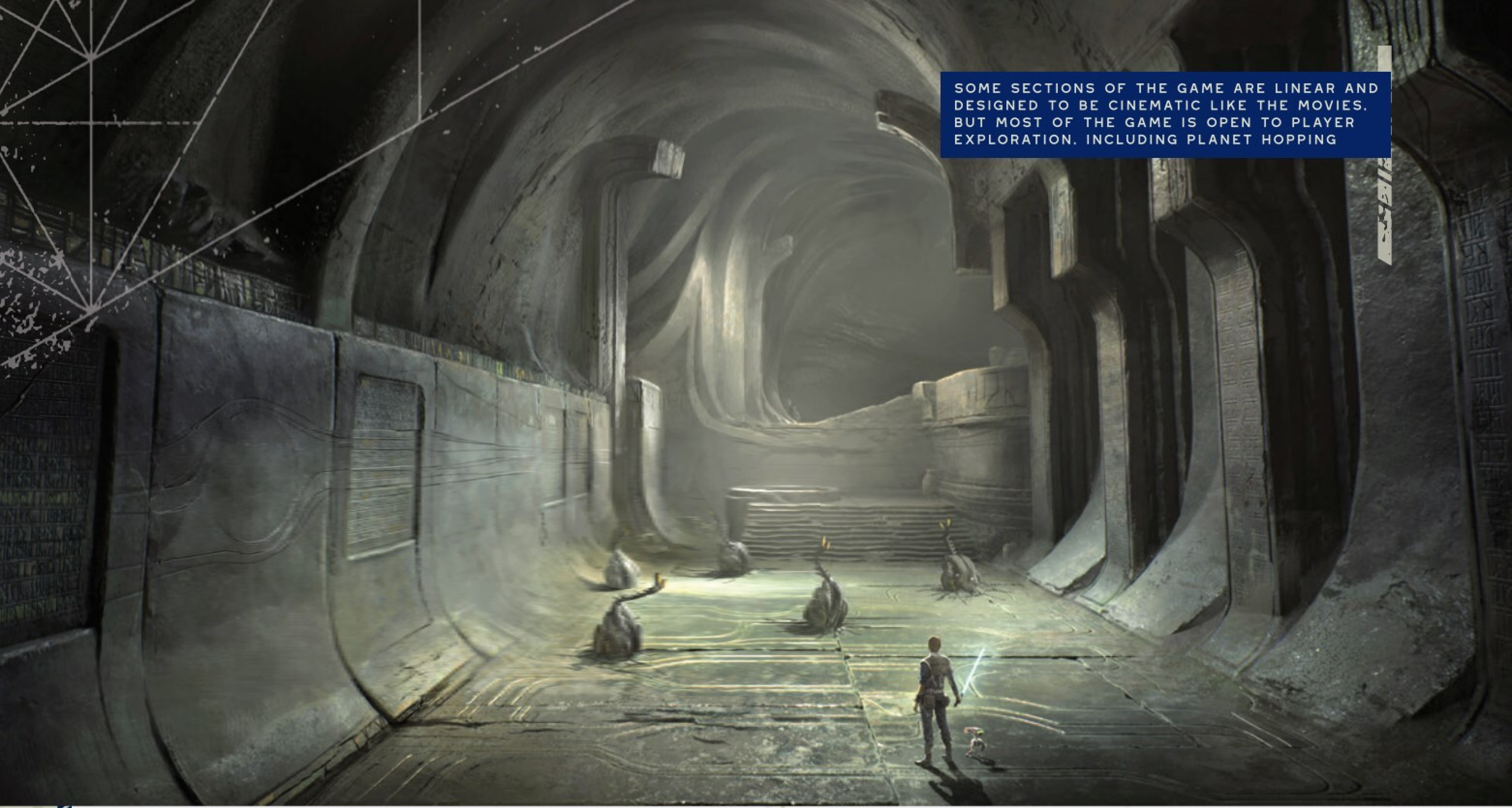
The younger version of Saw is agile and doesn't have problems breathing like he does in *Rogue One*, but is still suspicious of everyone he doesn't know. He exchanges pleasantries with Cal before descending off of the AT-AT again, which continues its march toward a much larger base, this one protected by a zeta-class cargo shuttle. It's no match for the AT-AT, but the pilot wisely angles its crash toward the walker's legs, which make them buckle like thin wood. The walker slowly tilts forward and its head races toward the ground. Cal tells BD to hold tight, but the impact sends both of them flying through the cockpit.

Neither are seriously injured by the crash and emerge on Kashyyyk's battle-torn surface through one of the walker's windows. BD beeps at Cal quizzically. "Yeah, I'm okay," he replies. "Are you okay?" BD beeps again, this time with tones of joy. "No, we're not doing that again," Cal says with a smirk.

"You just wrecked a perfectly good walker," Saw says as he confronts the unexpected help that delivered a small victory in his war against the Empire. This conversation is a part of a cutscene in which Saw brings Cal up to speed on his operations on Kashyyyk, and Cal in turn says he's looking for Tarfful. Hearing this name puts Saw on edge, and he immediately says Tarfful is impossible to find, as he is *the* freedom fighter and symbol of the wookiee resistance. When Cal says the inquiry is "Jedi business," Saw scoffs at the notion that the Jedi still exist, but soon changes his tone when he realizes Cal is speaking truthfully. He asks Cal if he got the saber from a corpse, but Cal confidently says it came from his master. Saw points Cal to a refinery that is using wookiees as slave labor. Some of the captives just happen to be guerilla fighters who may have a lead for him.

This short break from the action flows seamlessly in and out of gameplay, and is nicely framed, giving each character face time along with the proper musical cues that set the stage. Asmussen says this introduction to Kashyyyk is one of many big, linear Star Wars sequences meant to be cinematic like the films. As big and powerful as this moment is, it isn't indicative of the full experience Respawn is trying to deliver in Jedi: Fallen Order.

RESPAWN IS TEASING ONE OF THE BIG MYSTERIES OF THE GAME IS EXPLORING A LONG-EXTINCT CIVILIZATION THAT HIS TIES TO THE JEDI ORDER



SOME SECTIONS OF THE GAME ARE LINEAR AND DESIGNED TO BE CINEMATIC LIKE THE MOVIES. BUT MOST OF THE GAME IS OPEN TO PLAYER EXPLORATION, INCLUDING PLANET HOPPING

TRAVERSING THE WILDS

With a lead in hand, Cal has BD-1 bring up the map of the region, which is displayed as a 3D hologram projected from one of the droid's eyes. The game doesn't pause at this point, so the player needs to be careful when using the map. A clear holographic display of the environment appears, complete with geographic and industrial elevations. The map colors in areas the player has been to, and also highlights points of interest in gold. The map is a critical component that helps players explore. Jedi: Fallen Order is one of the few games out there that doesn't use a waypoint system.

"We want to trust the player to find their own way and discover the world without bread-crumbing them along," says Jeff Magers, lead level designer. "We'll mark an objective on their map that is well off in the distance in the fog of war, and the player has to figure out how to discover and explore toward that ultimate goal."

After the map dissipates, Cal decides to take BD to the refinery, while Cere hopes to gain more intel by monitoring Imperial communications. Greez just doesn't seem to like anything that is happening.

At this point in the game, the player has complete freedom to chart their own course through the wilderness. Some areas feature multiple paths that can freely be explored, while other areas may have paths that are blocked or inaccessible, perhaps requiring an unlearned Force power or gadget to open them up.

"We looked at the structure of Metroid Prime closely," Asmussen says. "Early on, I looked at the cadence of getting upgrades in Metroid and we mapped that out. Ours in Jedi: Fallen Order is nothing like that, but it was a good exercise to go through. I think [Jedi: Fallen Order's approach] will feel fresh; it's not exactly like Metroidvania. We also looked at games like Bloodborne and Dark Souls that have the same types of methodology. We studied those games and they inspired us to find an experience that works well for our game."

One of the environmental interactions arrives early within a darkened Imperial structure. Cal and BD come across a large device that has lost its power. If the device were powered up, it could slide along a path on the floor, potentially revealing a new area. Cal leaps up and grabs onto the top of the metal device, shimmying along it quickly to a position where BD can leap on a panel to give it a shock of life. This ability came from a workbench Cal found nearby that allowed him to install an overcharge upgrade to BD, which is also shown cosmetically on the droid. The player tells BD when to turn on the device, which Asmussen says is a little gameplay interaction that goes a long way in creating timed puzzles and different gameplay moments.

"I think what the Metroid-style level design does for us, is allow us to make really hand-crafted sections of games and experiences, while still allowing for a lot of exploration," Magers adds. "It's somewhat a way to give the player guided exploration. A ton of freedom within the world, but at the same time we can deliver really hand-crafted moments."

As players duck off into the corners of environments, Cal stumbles upon chests that reward him with a variety of upgrades. These chests hold items that can extend his Force and health meters, as well as skill points that he can cash in on a skill tree to unlock new abilities and move sets. Respawn wouldn't go into what kinds of skills Cal can unlock, but did give us a look at the screen, which features a sea of interlinked circles.

Since Cal doesn't heal over time during combat, he needs to rely on health canisters to get a boost on the fly. If his health is low, he can snap his fingers or ask BD for help (performed by pressing up on the d-pad). The canister pops out of a compartment in BD's casing, and Cal catches it, and within just a second, applies it to himself for an immediate shot of health. These health canisters function exactly like Dark Souls' Estus Flasks, and won't replenish until the player finds a save point or returns to *The Stinger Mantis*. Retreating to a save point comes with a risk, however, as enemies will respawn.

THE STORY UNFOLDS DURING THE "DARK TIMES," WHICH TAKE PLACE YEARS AFTER THE EVENTS OF *REVENGE OF THE SITH*

WHY RESPAWN?

Prior to beginning development of Jedi: Fallen Order, Respawn pitched EA on a Star Wars project, but the two sides couldn't agree on a deal that made sense. Director Stig Asmussen and a small team of developers at Respawn then set out to create a new intellectual property that featured third-person melee combat. When a demo was ready, Respawn pitched it to EA, which loved what was there, but thought it had great potential as Star Wars game. Respawn's CEO Vince Zampella asked his team if they would rather continue working on the original IP or turn it into Star Wars. The team enthusiastically said "Star Wars."

The next step was getting the blessing from Lucasfilm. Respawn pitched the melee action game, but Lucasfilm was wary, as Jedi are not freely thrown around and are a sacred part of the franchise that need the right guidance. Asmussen and his team eventually delivered enough information and assurances to make Lucasfilm come around on the idea for a Jedi game. Lucasfilm helped Respawn figure out the era and story for this particular Jedi tale.

Determining when to burn health canisters is part of the strategy tied to exploration. BD periodically leaps off of Cal's back to gather items he sees that can be used to synthesize new canisters. Asmussen says obtaining additional canisters is a significant reward, as BD starts the game with only two of them.

Exploration also unearths other chest types that contain cosmetic items to change the way Cal, BD, and *The Stinger Mantis* look. And yes, lightsaber parts are a part of that equation. If a blue blade isn't your style, you can find different colors, hilts, and other components that alter the saber's overall design. Just don't expect to get a red blade for a Jedi.

One of the Force powers Cal taps into frequently is close to the hearts of many of Respawn's employees who worked on the Titanfall games. He can wall run for a good 15 feet, but only on specific surfaces that have a visual language players will get to know. Jumping toward a wall is as easy as hitting a button. Cal can also call upon the Force to perform a double jump, a move that breaks the laws of gravity in most games, but actually makes sense given the Jedi's power pool. When Cal doesn't need to use the Force, he can swing on vines hanging from trees.

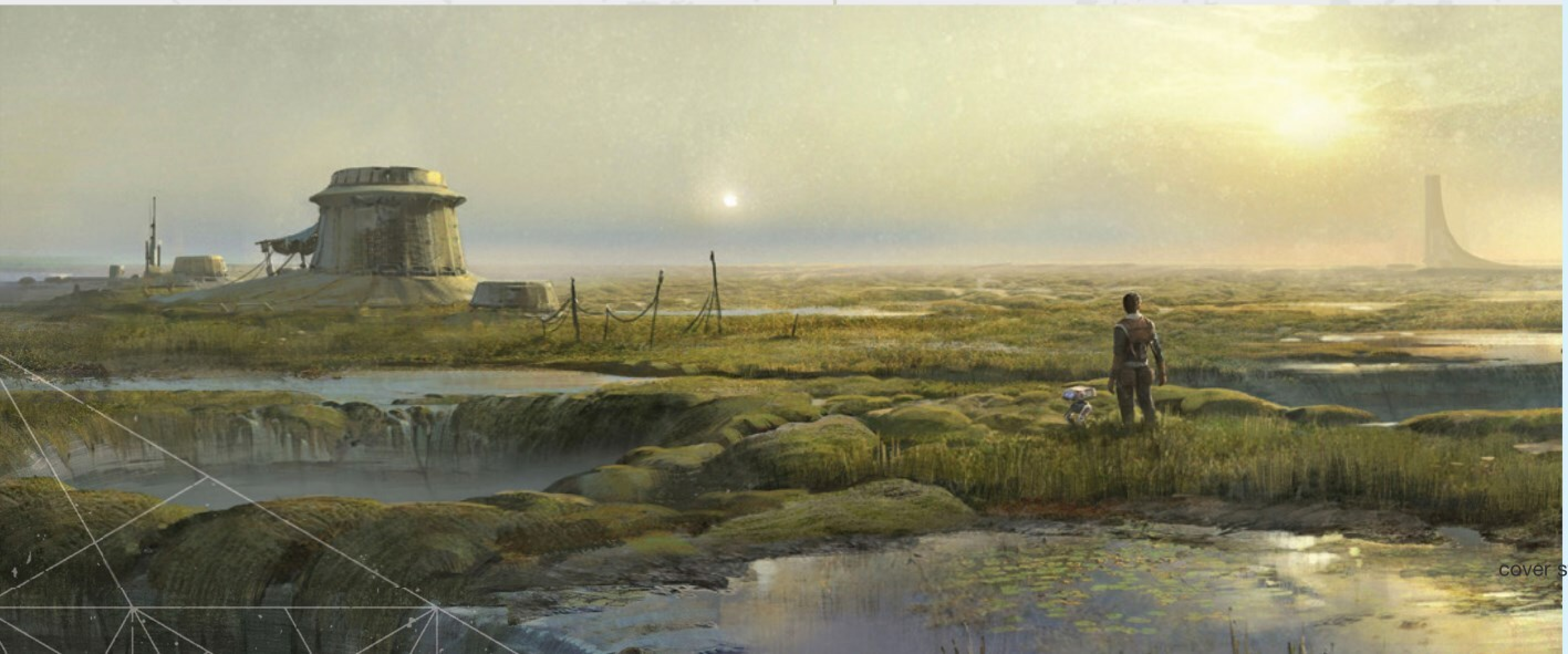
"We're an action-adventure game with a ton of different obstacles you can run into," Magers adds. "We've got the wall-run, we've got vines you can swing from, balance beams, climbs – we've got a big suite of these traversal tools and toys, and where it gets really fun is when we start to string those together." Magers says there are some instances where Cal will be wall-running and have to execute Force powers mid-sprint in order to unlock new paths before he reaches the end.

As Cal explores Kashyyyk's wilderness, BD can scan fallen enemies and the environment to give the player a chance to learn more about the world through log entries. Respawn hasn't settled on whether or not these optional discoveries will give players potential skill points if enough are collected, but does want to reward all forms of exploration.

Kashyyyk's wilderness offers much more than the gargantuan Wroshyr trees the wookiees build their homes in. Dangerous things roam this planet, and some are found lurking in caves darkened to the point that Cal needs to use his saber as a torch. One such threat is a human-sized spider with yellow and brown markings on its bulbous abdomen. The spiders are aggressive and use webbing to try to slow prey down. Their legs are no match for a lightsaber, however. If Cal can get a drop on it, he can perform a stylish one-hit kill by leaping up on its abdomen and sending his saber through it. We also learned about a large frog-like creature from another planet with a lengthy, sticky tongue that can be chopped in two. Respawn wants to add as many of these one-hit kills as it can, but time and budget will dictate how many make it into the final cut of the game.

Should Cal come across creatures engaged with Imperial forces, he can sit back and watch the two sides battle to the death before joining the fray, or use this window of distraction to get a jump on both sides. Respawn showed us a battle in its development sandbox that included an AT-ST and Imperial ground troops taking on several giant, ogre-like beasts, acid-spewing slugs, and aggressive lizards.

Kashyyyk was an impressive first look that featured plenty of puzzles and reveals I don't want to spoil for you. This gameplay slice takes place roughly a few hours into the game, and lasts for around 30 minutes, which Asmussen says gives us a look of just 15 to 20 percent of this planet, implying Jedi: Fallen Order may be somewhat lengthy.



THE MECHANICS OF WAR

In most Star Wars stories, stormtroopers are fodder, sometimes arriving in great numbers to send a volley of lasers toward targets. The standard stormtrooper unit type appears in Jedi: Fallen Order, but not en masse. They are most effective as long-range shooters located on higher ground. They send periodic laser blasts toward Cal that can tick away at his health as he engages with more deadly adversaries on the ground.

Most of the Imperial Forces thrown at the player are decked out in heavy weaponry or equipment that can detour a Jedi. The Empire knows what it is hunting, and brings tools that can handle the job. Some troopers have energy shields on the end of their blaster, others have flamethrowers that can keep Cal at bay, and some even wield rocket launchers. These powerful foes still fall into Jedi: Fallen Order's grunt category, yet each can give Cal a run for his credits.

The more serious threats are sometimes larger in size, like the KX-series security droid. Star Wars fans were first introduced to this tall, slender unit through *Rogue One*'s sarcastic (and humorous) K-2SO. Despite being somewhat awkward-looking droids, the KXes are fast and athletic, and can pick up Cal by the throat and slam him to the ground, taking a huge chunk of his health away, all while offering a comedic quip. Some battles include vehicles like an AT-ST, which stomps around on the battlefield and alternates between firing lasers, rockets, and mines. The player can send all of these attacks back through the Force.

The moment where players will likely panic most is when a purge trooper enters the fray. These darkly armored and highly trained soldiers are a part of the Emperor's Inquisitorious program, dispatched to soften up the Jedi before a Force-powered Sister or Inquisitor shows up to take the Jedi down. The purge troopers almost always have some form of an electroblade in hand, and are eager to exchange blows. These troopers taunt Cal mid-battle, and are quick to counter his strikes. Each of the distinct electroweapons they wield requires different strategizing, as the attack speed of a long staff is much slower than two smaller swords. If the purge troopers are nearby, there's a good chance the Second Sister isn't far behind. Respawn doesn't want to reveal anything about her at this point, but as our cover art shows, she uses a double-bladed saber and conceals her true identity behind a visor. Respawn hasn't come out and said if the Second Sister is the primary antagonist, but we have a feeling she can't be the only one hunting Cal.

Asmussen says the game features a variety of boss and mini boss battles, and the creatures that appear in each world are unique to those places – meaning you won't come across a different colored version of a beast you fought on a different planet.

Most battles throw numerous enemies at Cal, and from what I saw, many are engaged in environmental interactions and are not just standing around. In my first hands-on session in a development test room, my instinct was to run into the middle of four enemies and wildly slash everyone, but this attempt was met with a quick counter by a stormtrooper who knocked me to the ground.

Although Cal seems proficient with the saber and can chain together acrobatic swings when the player hits the square button in succession, he rarely finds free moments to link that many swings together. Most enemies are quick to recover, and can take him down if he isn't on his game. This is where Respawn's "thoughtful combat" approach comes into play and turns lightsaber combat as we know it on its head.

"It was always a decision for it not to be a combo-based game where you're doing multiple inputs," says Jason de Heras, combat designer. "It was all about precision and efficiency – kind of like a Jedi. They're highly trained warriors. So, we wanted to translate that into the control scheme and into the move set where we give you very situational and specific abilities that you have to figure out over the course of the game."

After picking myself up off of the floor, I backed away from the trooper that got the best of me and watched how he and the other units closed in on my location. Just positioning myself to reduce the angles enemies could use to attack me became priority number one. I then waited for the trooper to get close. He raised his blade and swung. A quick tap of L1 blocked his first strike, but he came at me again, and I timed this defensive action better, resulting in a parry that stunned him and left his chest vulnerable. Cal kicked out

THE CAST SO FAR

Respawn hasn't talked much about the story, but has given us looks at key players within it. The cast will undoubtedly grow as Cal travels to new planets, but here's who we know will be in the game.

CAL KESTIS

The main protagonist in Jedi: Fallen Order is a new character created by Respawn and Lucasfilm. He's played both in voice and performance capture by actor Cameron Monaghan (*Shameless*, *Gotham*). Monaghan has played both the Joker and a Jedi, just like Mark Hamill.

CERE

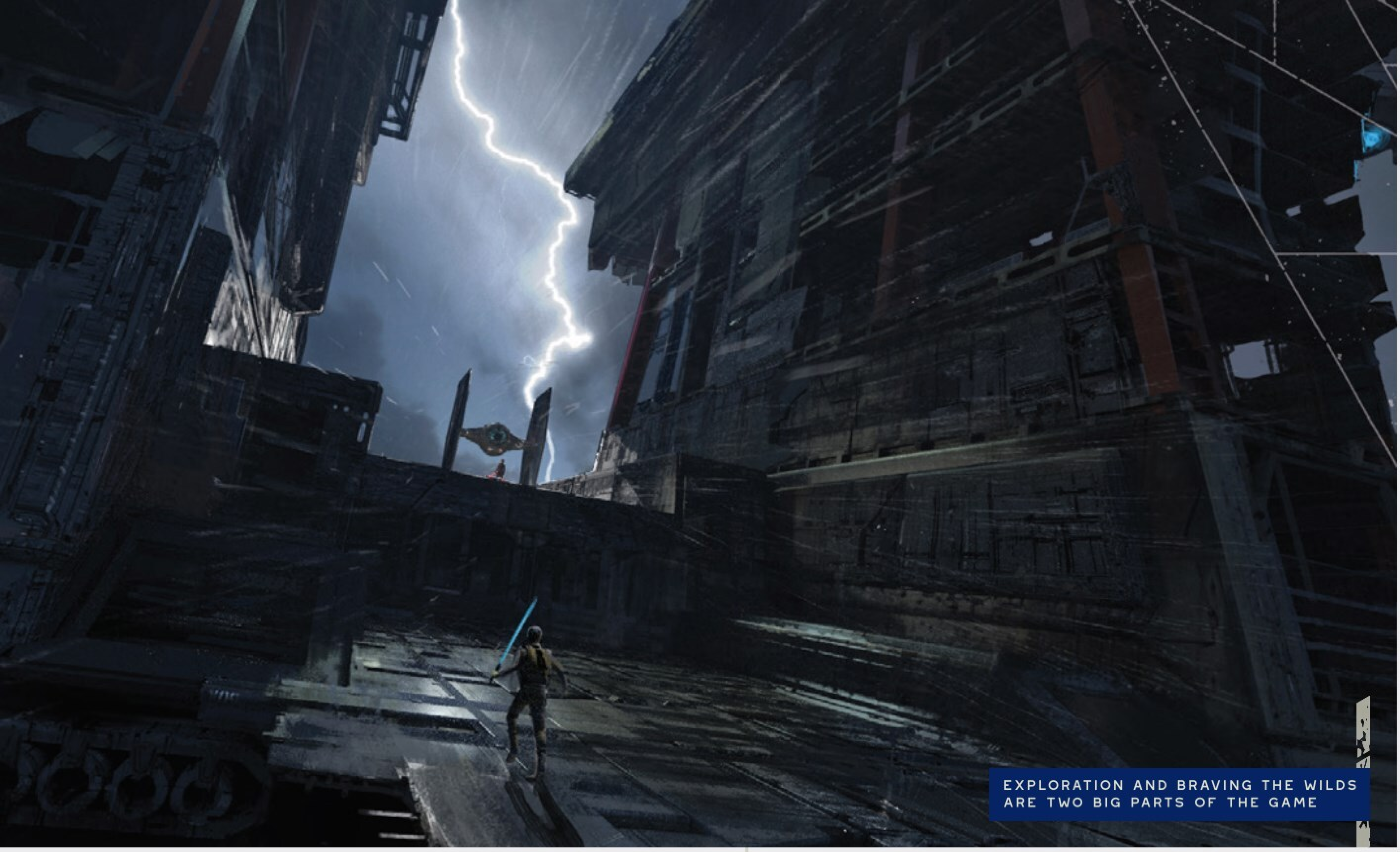
Played by actress Debra Wilson (*Avatar*, *Mad TV*), Cere is a full-fledged Jedi Knight who has need of Cal and has promised to help him find his place in the world. Cere doesn't appear to be hiding her Jedi powers during this dark time.

SAW GERRERA

This Resistance fighter has quickly become a key player in Star Wars lore, first debuting in *The Clone Wars*, and then making appearances in *Rogue One* and *Rebels*. In Jedi: Fallen Order, he's young and his body and mind have not been broken by war yet. He is voiced by Forest Whitaker.

SECOND SISTER

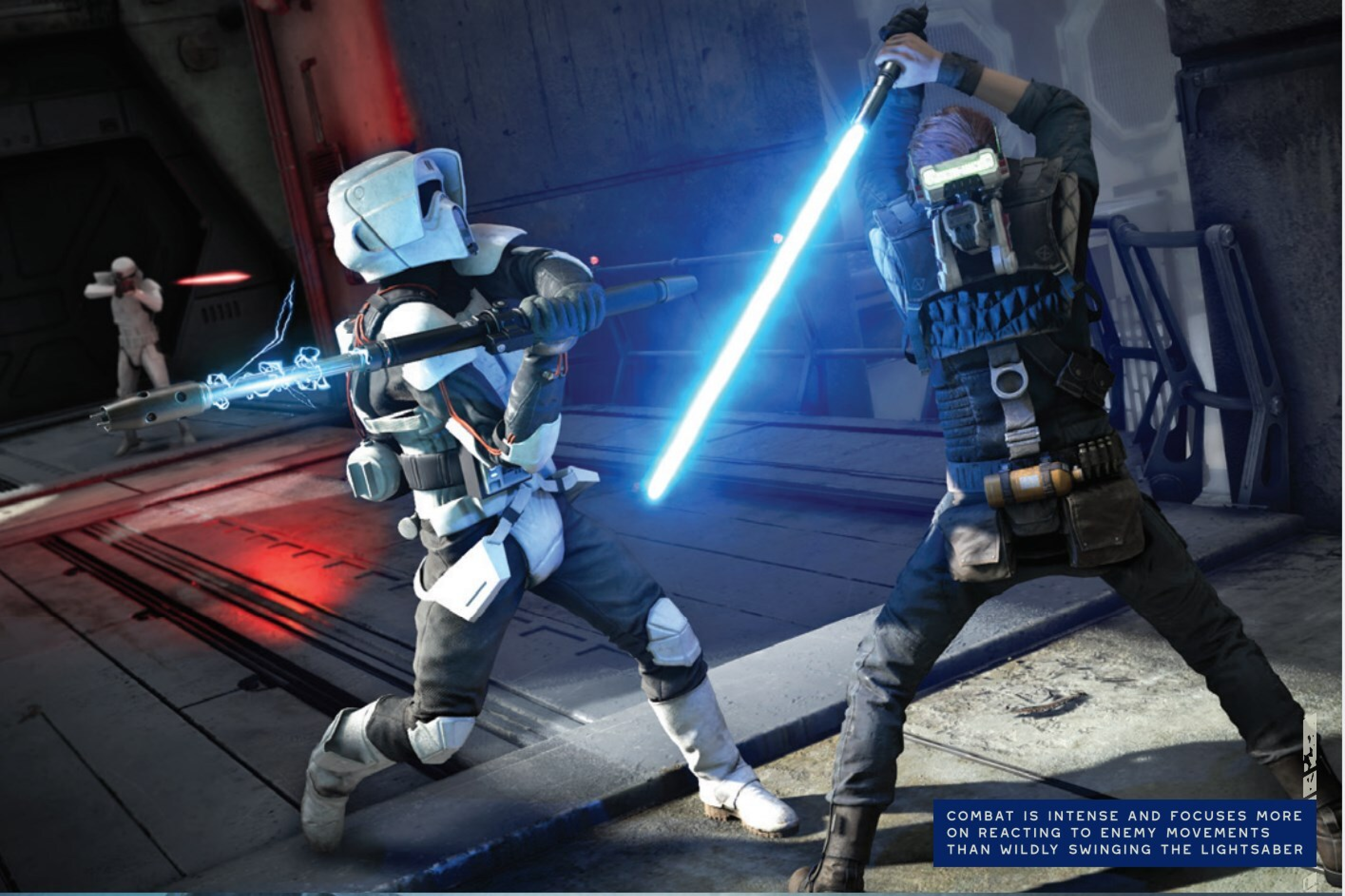
Once a part of the Jedi Order, the Second Sister turned on her people and joined the Emperor's Inquisitorious. She now kills Jedi. She first appeared in the comic book *Darth Vader: Dark Lord of the Sith*, but was first created by Respawn and Lucasfilm's story group. Her appearance was an Easter egg for the forthcoming game.


EXPLORATION AND BRAVING THE WILDS ARE TWO BIG PARTS OF THE GAME

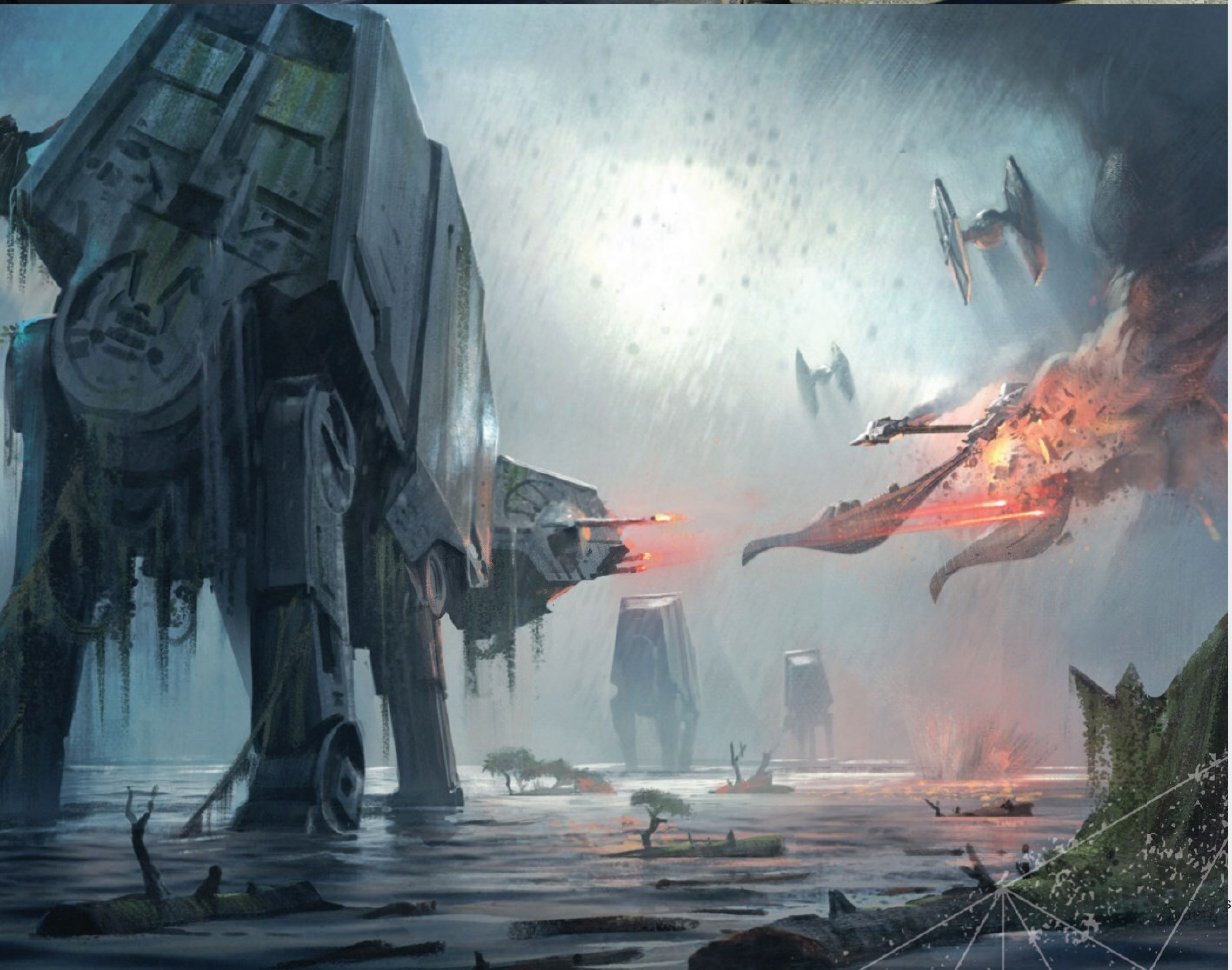
one of his legs and killed him with a saber to the chest.

A purge trooper jumped in next and unleashed a lunge attack. I tapped circle to side step, but it wasn't enough distance to clear his left blade. I then learned that I could double-tap circle to perform an evasive roll to clear me of most threats. If you see an enemy's body flash red, that means it's an unblockable attack and you need to get clear fast.

Almost every button press in the game has an augment that is executed by either double-tapping a button or holding it. Respawn designed the controls in way that all powers can be used at any time, and the player will never be asked to dive into a menu to swap them out. The controls are mapped in ways that are easy to grasp. On the PlayStation 4 controller, lightsaber strikes are mapped to square for basic swings and triangle for focused attacks. If the player taps triangle, they execute a heavy attack, but if they hold the button, Cal performs a force-powered, close-the-gap dash. The X button is jump, which can be used for leap attacks when followed up by either saber strike.



COMBAT IS INTENSE AND FOCUSES MORE ON REACTING TO ENEMY MOVEMENTS THAN WILDLY SWINGING THE LIGHTSABER



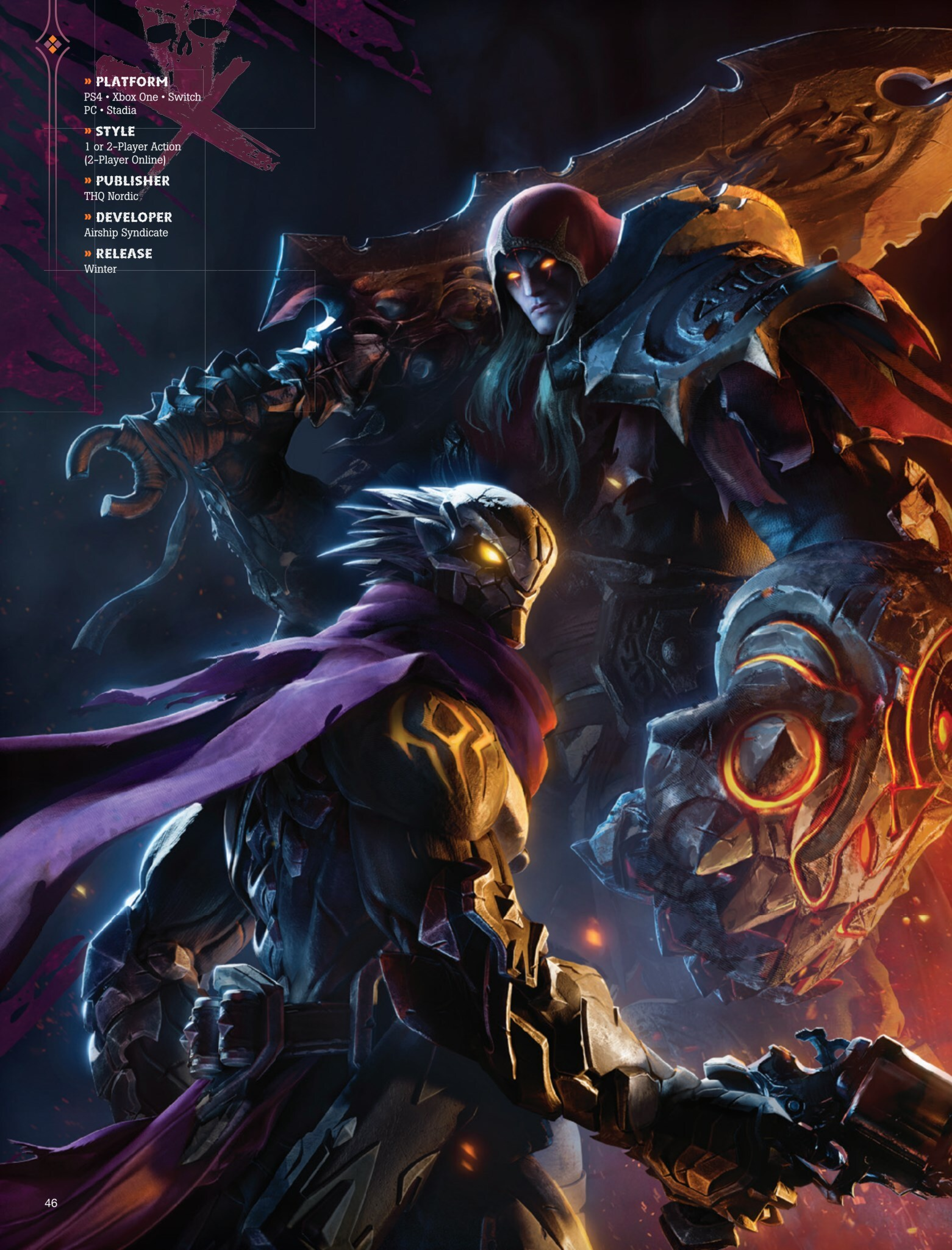
» PLATFORM
PS4 • Xbox One • Switch
PC • Stadia

» STYLE
1 or 2-Player Action
(2-Player Online)

» PUBLISHER
THQ Nordic

» DEVELOPER
Airship Syndicate

» RELEASE
Winter

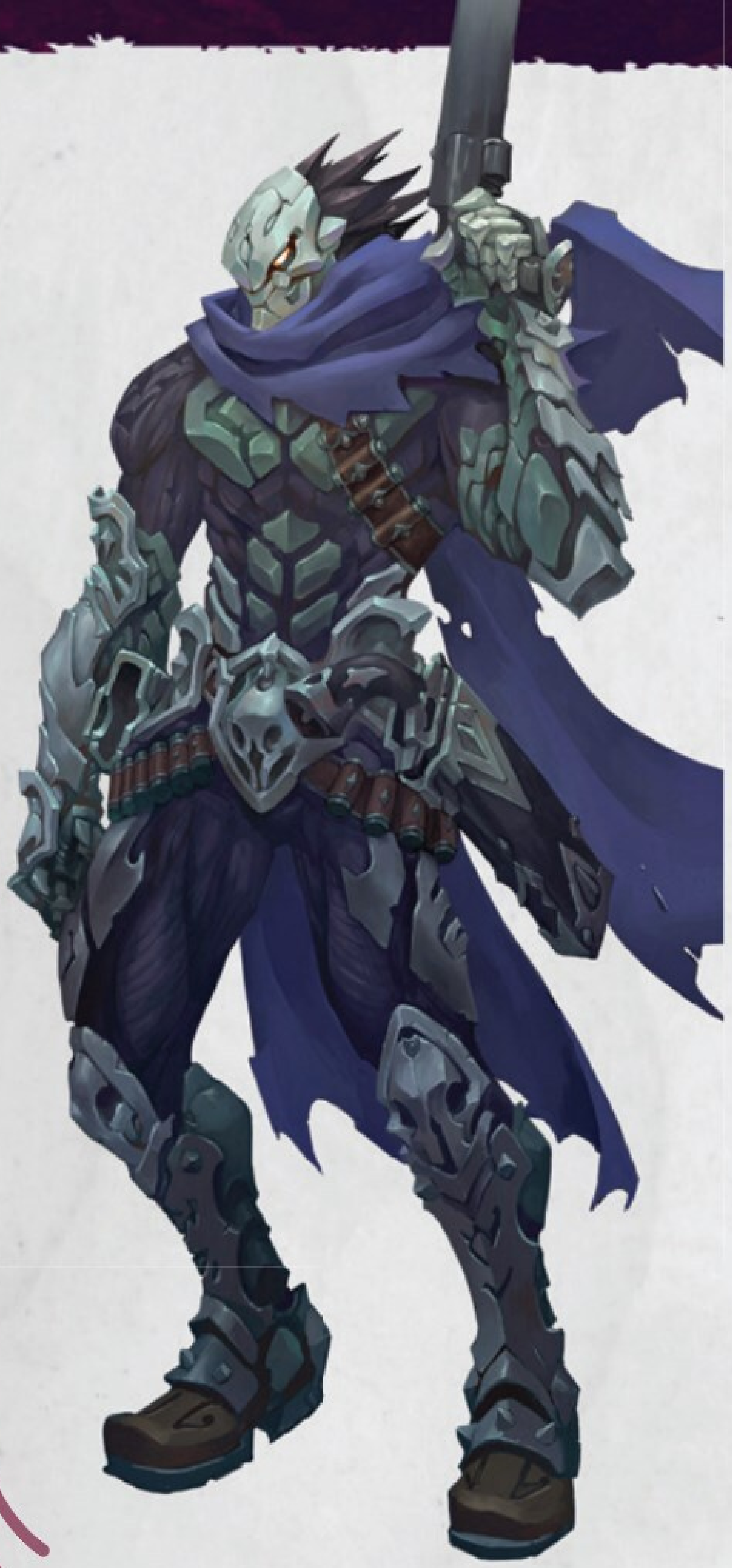


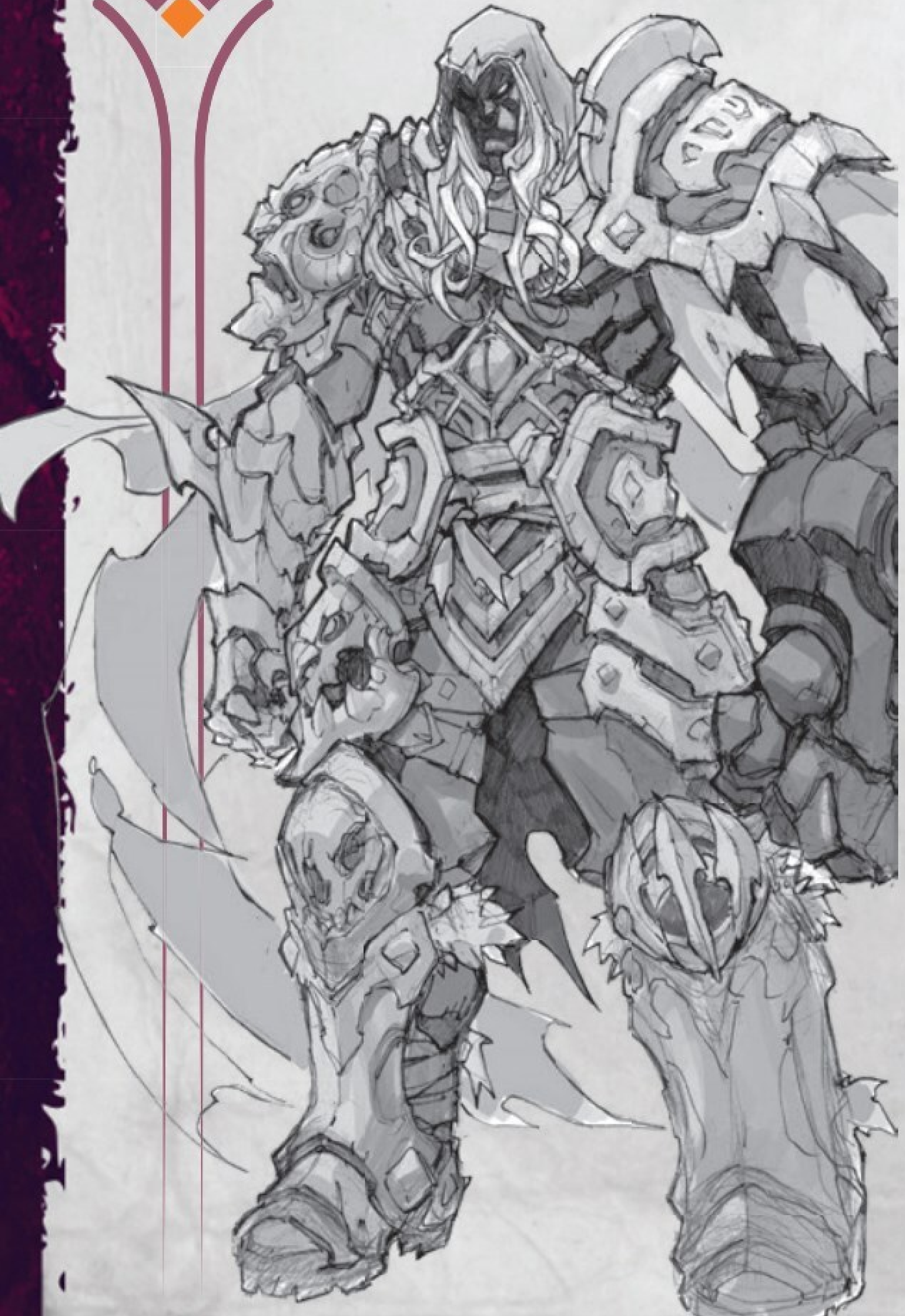
COOPERATIVE APOCALYPSE

War returns with Strife by his side in Darksiders Genesis

Through the collapse of THQ and its recovery by Nordic Games (now THQ Nordic), Darksiders' road has been winding and chaotic. At least two studios appeared from the ashes of Darksiders' developer, Vigil Games. One is Gunfire Games, which developed Darksiders 3. The other is Airship Syndicate (Battle Chasers: Nightwar), which is now creating a new game in the franchise it helped create called Darksiders Genesis. Airship Syndicate was co-founded by Joe Madureira, one of the directors of the original Darksiders and the artist responsible for the series' distinct visual style. In that way, Genesis is a return to the past, but fans will find a mixture of new and familiar gameplay. Players can finally play as Strife and again as War, the horseman who started it all, in a cooperative adventure – but this isn't Darksiders 4.

by Kyle Hilliard





THE GENESIS

Darksiders Genesis takes place before the events of the first Darksiders, but Joe Maduiera and Airship Syndicate president and game director Ryan Stefanelli see it more as a side story. "It does come before, so technically, if you called it a prequel, that would not be wrong," Maduiera says. It works as a starting point for those new to Darksiders, but longtime fans will obviously have a better understanding of the world and recognize characters who play larger roles in the future.

"It's way, way before Darksiders 1," Maduiera says in regard to Genesis' exact place in the timeline. "It's just shortly after they become Horsemen, after the war in Eden and after the Nephilim are destroyed." At this point in the story, humans do not exist yet and you won't be visiting Earth. The game starts in Eden, but much of the action takes place in hell, which is where our hands-on session begins.

WAR AND STRIFE GO TO HELL

Darksiders' hell doesn't quite look like the underworld people typically imagine, filled with fire and lava. It's a diverse landscape and even includes some snowy areas. Environment designer Jesse Carpenter's goal is to create a hell that eschews the typical representation of the underworld. It's not so much a place of eternal punishment as it is just the place where demons live. "We wanted to do something different than just caves with stalactites everywhere," Carpenter says. "We wanted to treat it like a world with a sky where you can go outside."

I take control of War as design director Steve Maduiera (Joe Maduiera's brother) controls Strife. The camera is locked overhead, making it feel closer to an action RPG. We're playing online so we each have our own screen, but local split-screen is also available.

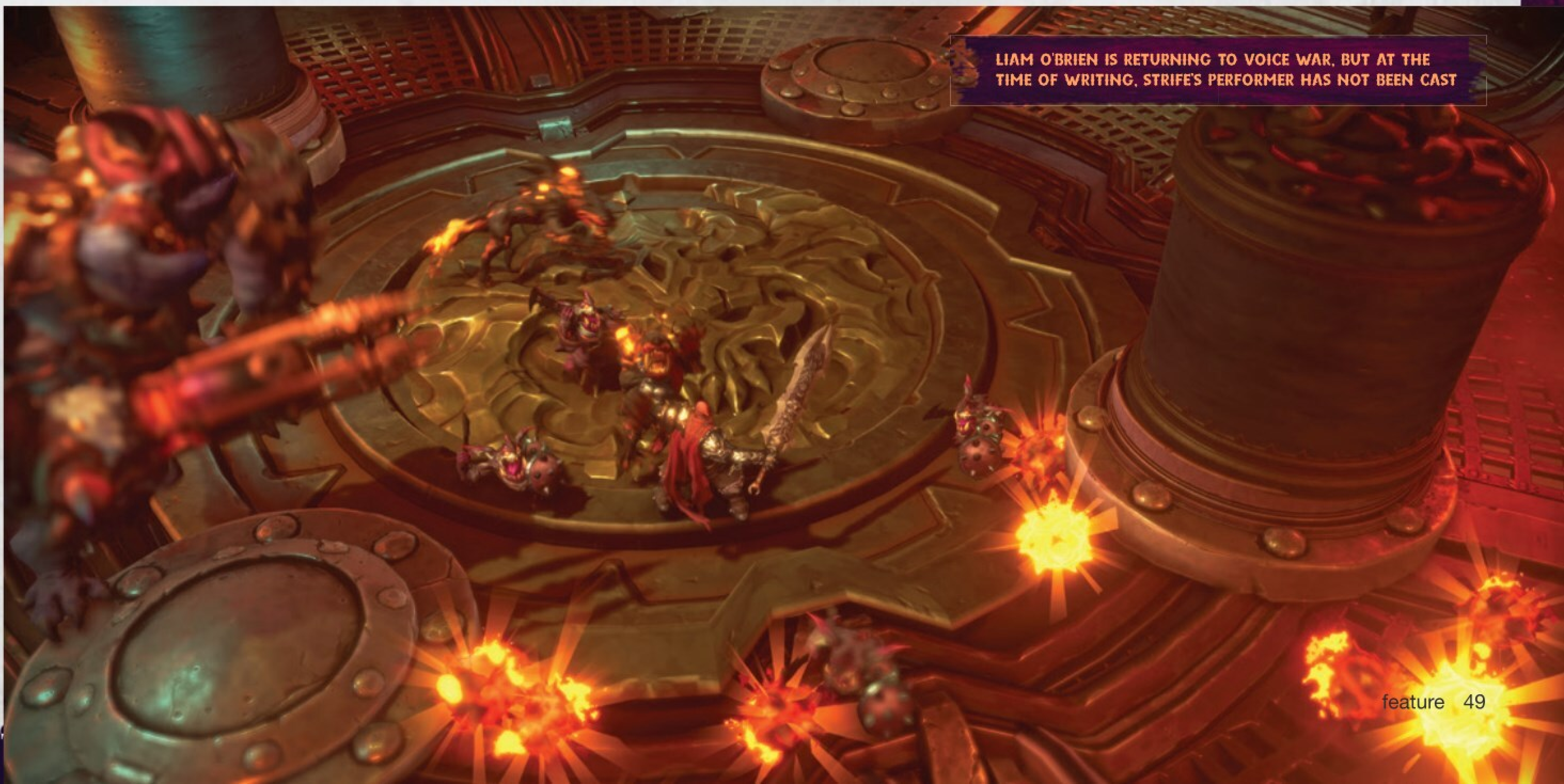
Even with the new camera perspective, War plays surprisingly close to how he felt in the original Darksiders, with large sword swiping combos and a useful dodgeroll ability. He even uses some of his attacks from that game, like the one that causes blades to erupt from the ground. "We definitely wanted War as an anchor to feel like, 'Hey, if you've played Darksiders 1, he should feel like that when you're fighting'," Steve Maduiera says. I can also dash to get out of the way and throw the boomerang-like Crossblade using twin-stick controls to aim for far away enemies, but long-range combat is best left to Strife.

Strife has a pair of guns with alternate fire types you can change on the fly. One attack is a powerful single shot that can be charged up, while another shoots a continuous beam. Strife's standard gunfire is weak, but it doesn't use ammo like the alternate fire types. However, enemies drop ammo frequently, so you don't need to be conservative. He also uses a pair of powerful swords for close-up attacks. Playing cooperatively, it doesn't take long to find a good balance between War being the up-close brute while Strife fires from a short distance. Compared to the first three Darksiders games, the action is much faster. "What we really want this game to feel like is a fun romp through Darksiders," Stefanelli says. The moment-to-moment action feels closer to an arcade experience.

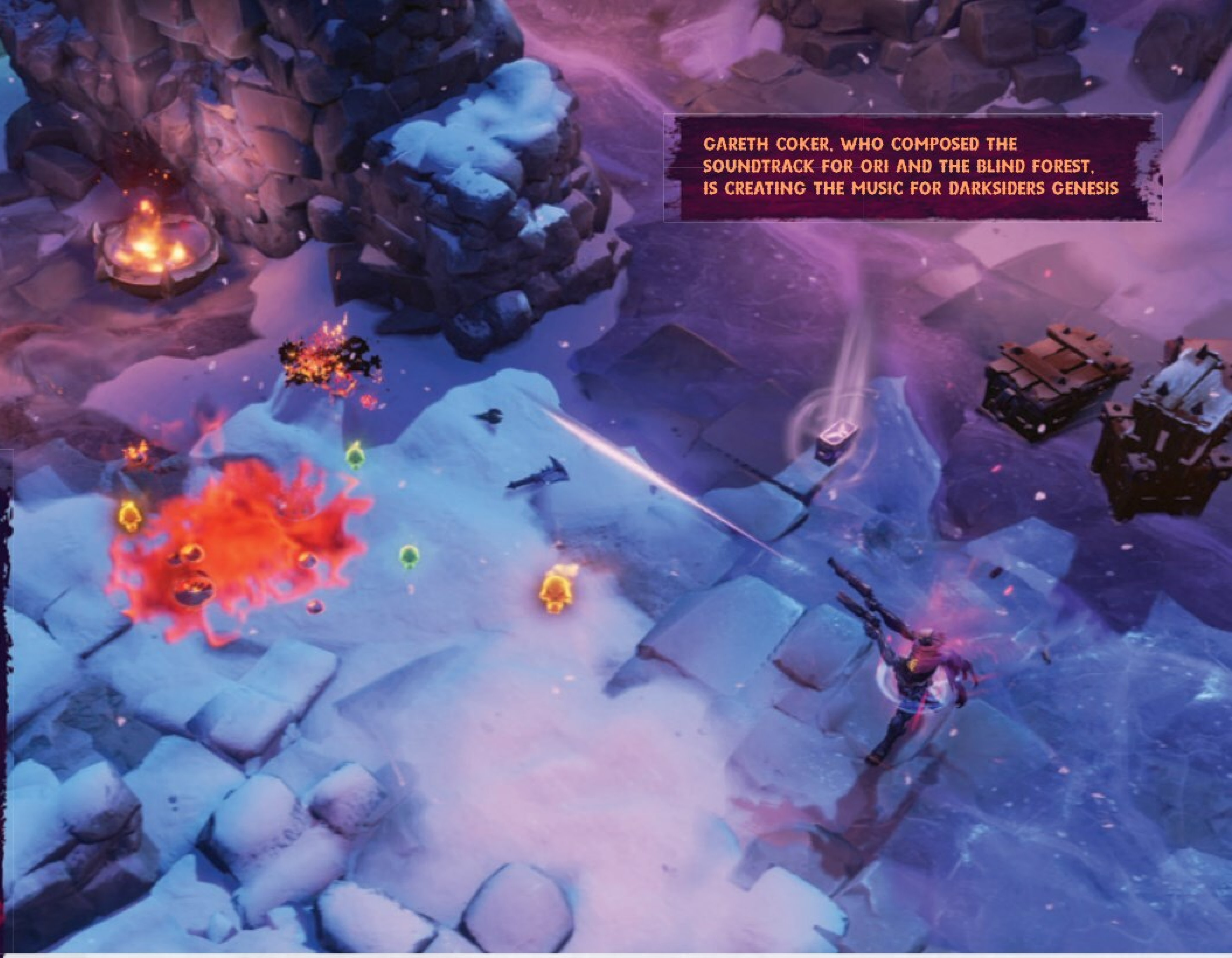
Genesis looks a little like Diablo with its overhead camera perspective, but I didn't collect any loot à la Darksiders 2. Instead, the incentive to replay levels and assist friends with their playthroughs is the promise of creature cores that occasionally drop from defeated enemies. Every enemy type drops a different core, which you use to unlock assorted active and passive abilities for War and Strife, like improved combos, health bonuses, or unlockable special attacks. You can successfully complete the game without farming enemies, but tackling the higher difficulties demands powered-up versions of War and Strife through farming enemies and replaying levels to discover all their secrets.

WHAT ABOUT FURY AND DEATH?

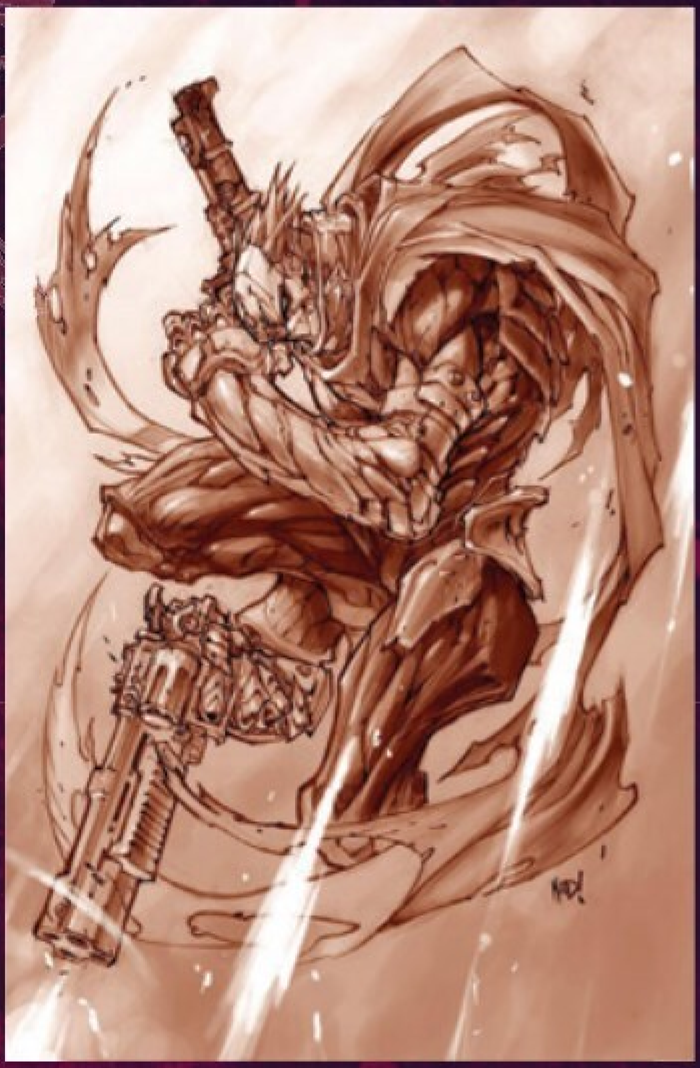
Many players had assumed the Darksiders series would coalesce into a four-player cooperative action game once all horsemen got their time in the spotlight, but that was never necessarily a concrete plan. "That was a lot of fan speculation," creative director Joe Maduiera says. "But it did start to sort of go that way." Genesis is not that long-rumored, cooperative horseman game, but that doesn't mean it can't exist eventually. "For us, we're obviously not trying to realize that dream." he says. "I think people are expecting the four-player, all four horsemen game. But I feel like that should probably be in the core series. This is just a different experience." There are narrative reasons for Death and Fury's absences in Genesis. "Death has taken the souls of the Nephilim, which are stored in that gem, so he's gone," he says. "And you don't really know what Fury is up to, but, they're discussed."



LIAM O'BRIEN IS RETURNING TO VOICE WAR, BUT AT THE TIME OF WRITING, STRIFE'S PERFORMER HAS NOT BEEN CAST



GARETH COKER, WHO COMPOSED THE SOUNDTRACK FOR ORI AND THE BLIND FOREST, IS CREATING THE MUSIC FOR DARKSIDERS GENESIS



STRIFE GETS HIS SHOT

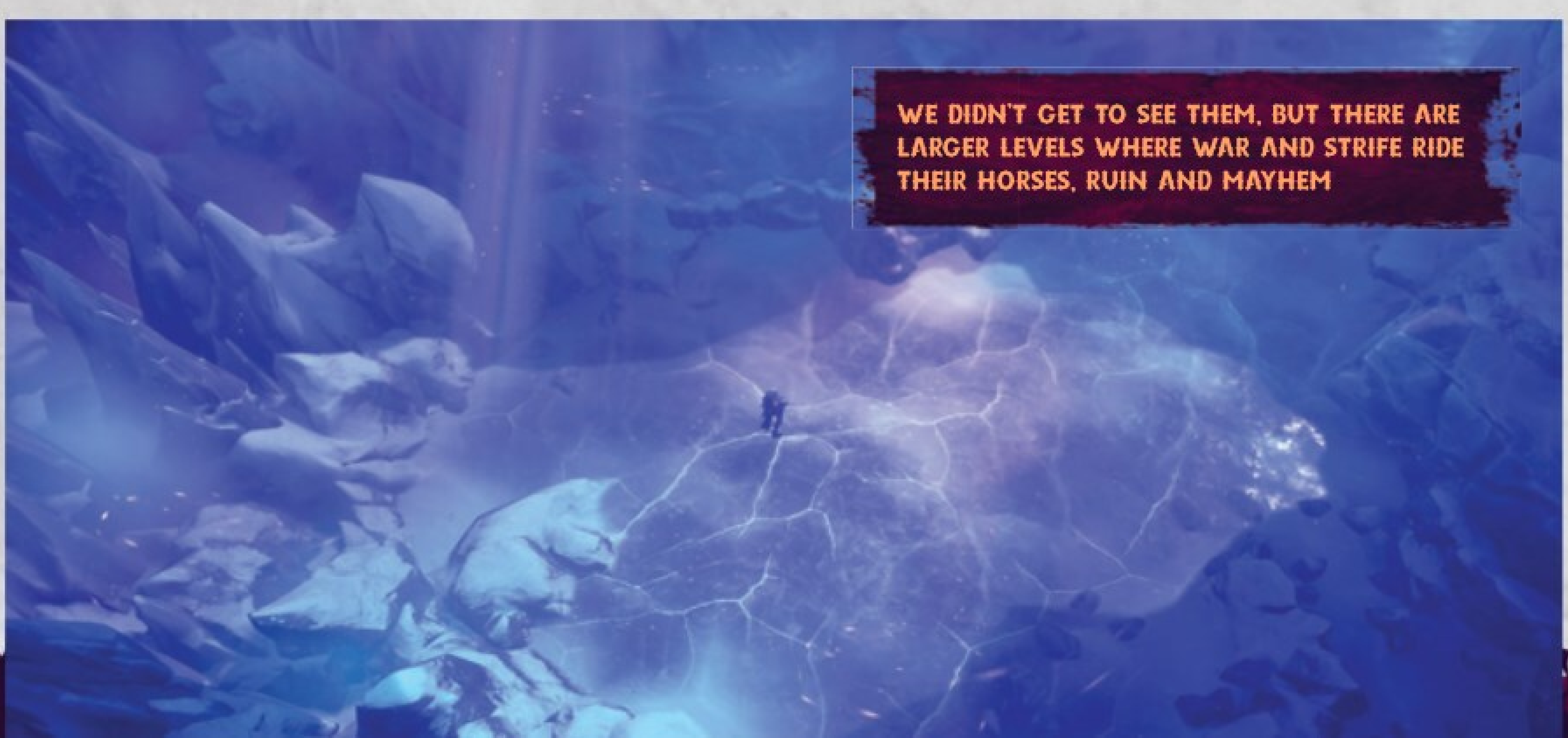
Among Darksiders' four horsemen, Strife has received the least amount of attention. Genesis may not be his starring role, but it is the first time he is playable. Along with all the horsemen, he was designed by Joe Maduiera during the early pitch stages of Darksiders 1, but his roles in 3 and Genesis meant it was time to look back at the original design. "What is this weird muscle-y stuff?" Joe Maduiera asks out loud while mousing over his first drawing of Strife (seen above), having pulled it up on a computer. He says Strife was originally inspired by the bio-organic armor of The Guyver anime. "We ended up going more ancient fantasy, so that just didn't work anymore," he says. His armor changed, but the core elements, like his hair, mask, scarf, and guns, are basically the same from his first drawing. His personality, on the other hand, has gone through a much bigger change. "At the very beginning I imagined he would be the Boba Fett guy that was everyone's favorite who didn't speak," he says. But in Genesis, Strife makes light of every situation and cracks frequent jokes. "I think Strife likes the chaos. He likes killing and fighting. He thinks it's fun."

You do more than just fight and collect cores. We solve a few puzzles that require one player to open pathways for the other by pulling levers. In one instance, we have to synchronize our timing to pull two disparate levers together. A section later forces us to sprint to avoid flowing lava while using a special ability to pull ourselves towards glowing blue lights with magic ziplines.

The early puzzles are simple, but Steve Maduiera says the puzzles get more complicated as you move through hell, and each horseman get character-specific tools necessary for solving later puzzles, but we didn't get to see any examples. The first two Darksiders games featured puzzle-solving as a main mechanic, leaning hard into the series' Zelda inspiration, but Genesis' focus is action. "Zelda inspires, in a subtle way, everything," Joe Maduiera says. But it's not the blueprint for Genesis as it was for the first two games.

As we explore and fight, War and Strife talk to each other with banter that doesn't interrupt gameplay. During a few specific moments, portraits appear on-screen while the two talk. War is his familiar stoic self, focusing on the mission and only talking business. Strife is surprisingly silly, making jokes and trying to get under War's skin. Genesis is still a dark game about the war between angels and demons, but the tone is lighter than previous Darksiders titles. "We knew for War and Strife to work together we couldn't have two serious dudes running around," Stefanelli says, "We pushed Strife towards the more sarcastic, funny route." Joe Maduiera describes their relationship as something closer to that of Deadpool and Colossus, or Thor and Loki.

If you aren't in the mood for co-op, playing alone is a viable option. In those instances, you switch back and forth between War and Strife with a button press. They each have their own health bars, and the horseman on the bench will recover a portion of their health while out of play. The puzzles also change if you're playing alone. In some instances, it is as simple as only pulling one lever instead of two – but sometimes it is more interesting. For the puzzle where you have to synchronize pulling the levers simultaneously with two players, you use a sticky bomb when playing alone, attaching it to the second lever and synchronizing with the explosion instead of another player.



WE DIDN'T GET TO SEE THEM, BUT THERE ARE LARGER LEVELS WHERE WAR AND STRIFE RIDE THEIR HORSES, RUIN AND MAYHEM

FIGHTING A LORD OF HELL

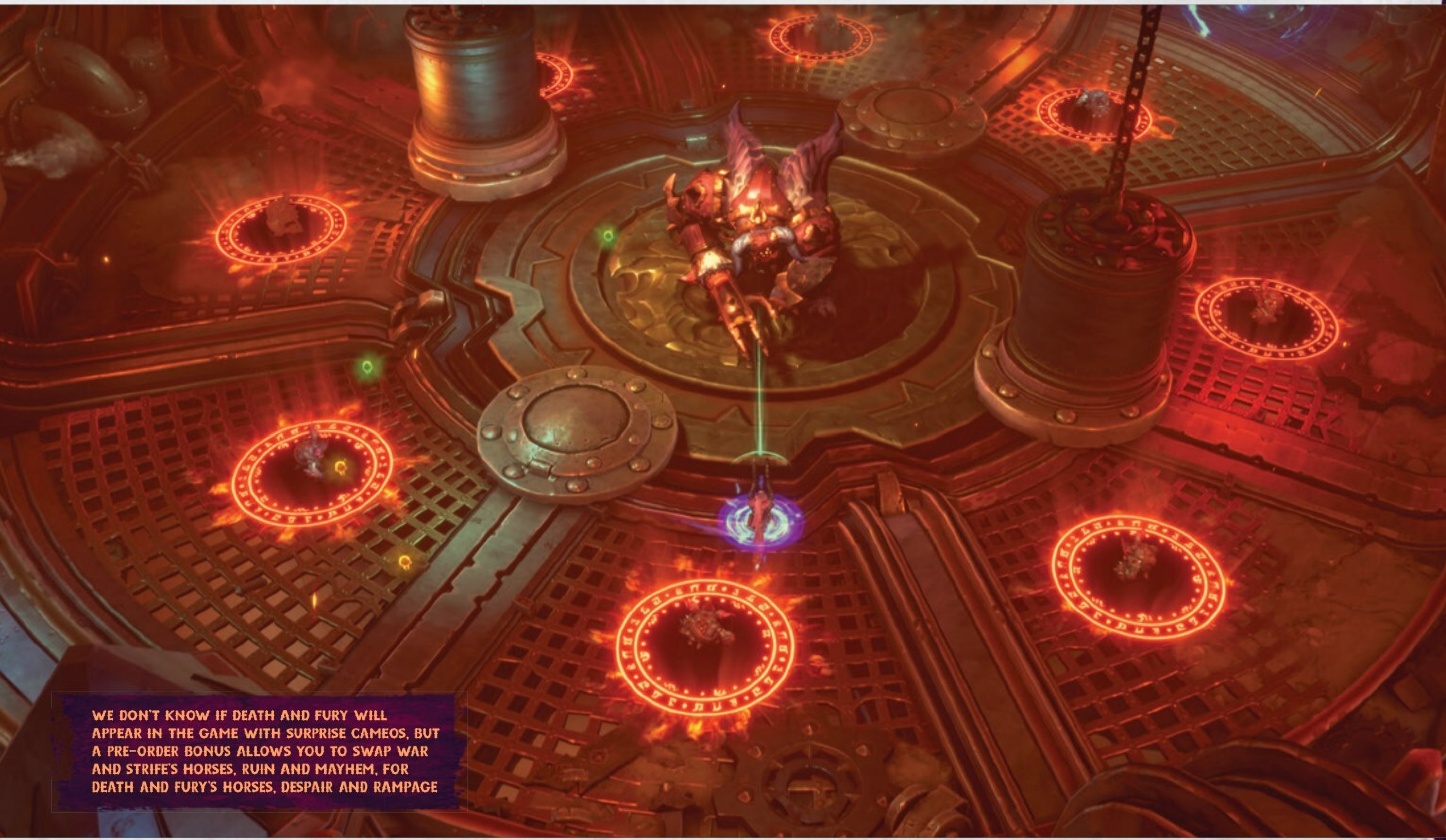
We end our gameplay demo with a boss fight against a Lord of Hell named Mammon. A cutscene plays, setting up a battle to take place in a room filled with gold and assorted treasures. Mammon is a short creature with a tail, and he starts throwing gold and treasure at the horsemen. Strife bats it away saying they can't be bought … until a miniature golden rocking horse catches his eye and he subtly, for a moment, seems to consider sparing Mammon in order to keep the treasure. The fight starts anyway and Mammon dives under the gold. "He's like a deadly Scrooge McDuck," Joe Maduiera says.

Mammon hides under the gold and pops out to attack and summon assorted distractions like a giant floating hammer that crushes us if we get stuck under its shadow, clones of himself, and coffins that spit out endless streams of smaller enemies. Strife drops caltrops, one of his special abilities, in front of the coffins to stem the flow of bad guys. By the end of the fight, Mammon has brought all of his distractions out at once, but we eventually bring him down with a context-sensitive execution move, a Darksiders feature that makes a return in Genesis.

THE UNEXPECTED RETURN TO DARKSIDERS

With its overhead perspective, cooperative gameplay, and focus on action, Genesis is definitely something new for Darksiders. It's not Darksiders 4, which Joe Maduiera and Stefanelli fully recognize. From its original pitch, it was meant to be a smaller story in the Darksiders universe Airship Syndicate's relatively small team could handle. "We always knew we wanted to make a multiplayer Darksiders, right?" Stefanelli says. "But with a small team, there is no way we could have gone and done the full Darksiders 4. At least, not done it justice."

Even at this scale, it is exciting for the team members, many of whom worked on the first two Darksiders games, to return to the franchise. After the release of Darksiders 2 in 2012, everyone was eager to do something different. After being forced into a break from the franchise by THQ's collapse, now felt like the right time to return. "In our minds, we didn't say we never want to work on Darksiders again, so when THQ finally shut down in finality, it was kind of like – wait … we left this story untold," Stefanelli says. "I think it would have been sad, speaking for me personally anyway, to have never gotten the chance to return to the series." Plus, after working on a the turn-based RPG Battle Chasers: Nightwar, Stefanelli says it is nice to get back to an action game. "I missed hitting things in the face."



WE DON'T KNOW IF DEATH AND FURY WILL APPEAR IN THE GAME WITH SURPRISE CAMEOS, BUT A PRE-ORDER BONUS ALLOWS YOU TO SWAP WAR AND STRIFE'S HORSES, RUIN AND MAYHEM, FOR DEATH AND FURY'S HORSES, DESPAIR AND RAMPAGE

RIDING INTO THE FUTURE

Using Red Dead Redemption II's dynamic open world as a blueprint, Rockstar plots an uncharted course for the future of its online multiplayer modes

BY MATT BERTZ

When **Red Dead Online** launched several months ago, Rockstar slapped the game with the beta tag for a reason. The studio wanted players to help it weed out technical issues, identify problem points, and recommend solutions for how to stabilize the foundation. The vocal masses did just that, calling out the excessively grindy economy, an open world that felt largely barren, and the annoying tendency for players to grief one another. As the months passed, many wondered, "Is this it? Is Red Dead Online already dead?" The answer to that question is an emphatic "no."

While Rockstar worked on fixes to identified problem points, it quietly considered larger questions of how to grow the online multiplayer experience in interesting new ways.

Due largely to technical constraints, the game inevitably loses some degree of fidelity when transitioning away from the story mode and into the online space. To make room for other people, something has to be sacrificed. But what if those sacrifices didn't need to be so large? What if you could preserve some degree of that dynamism, better encourage the freedom of players to pursue their own destiny in the open world, and even push beyond the boundaries of what the single-player experience offered in some of the most popular activities?

These are the questions Rockstar Games aims to ask with Red Dead Online moving forward.

» **PLATFORM** PS4 • Xbox One » **STYLE** Online Multiplayer Action » **PUBLISHER** Rockstar Games
» **DEVELOPER** Rockstar Games » **RELEASE** Summer

THE WESTERN WAY

Red Dead Online's direct predecessor, Grand Theft Auto Online, inhabits a unique place in the gaming landscape. After a rocky debut that turned off many thanks to its unstable servers, Rockstar developers put their collective heads down and worked, steadily improving the mode's infrastructure and expanding the play experience with new criminal empires to build, adversarial modes to compete in, and desirable luxury items that made the violent grind for ill-gained cash feel worth the effort. Eventually, the pieces clicked and players started coming in droves. GTA Online was no longer the stepchild to the best-in-class single-player campaign – it became a destination in its own right.

GTA Online grew beyond being just a fun way to pass the time; for many, it became a lifestyle. Following a steady stream of new content, daily active users grew. Crews like the Hillbilly Agenda formed, forging friendships that began in Rockstar social clubs and spilled into real life. At the same time, the PC mod scene flourished in unexpected ways with the introduction of custom role-play servers. Not everyone who enjoys GTA games is interested in competitive play, and these mods paint outside the lines, allowing players to live out seemingly mundane fantasies like being a shopkeeper, car insurance salesman, or real-estate agent. Heavily streamed on Twitch, GTA RP servers keep the game among the most viewed interactive entertainment experiences at any given moment. The growth has paid off exponentially for Rockstar Games and parent company Take-Two Interactive, with a game that's already considered the most profitable entertainment product of all time showing no signs of slowing.

Red Dead Online came online in the wake of this unprecedented success story. Like its predecessor, it released after the base game and began with a modest suite of activities, an intentional approach that allowed Rockstar to focus its efforts on stabilizing the foundation. With the game now working well enough for Rockstar to drop the beta tag, now comes the interesting part.

Take-Two shareholders undoubtedly want Rockstar to do everything it can to emulate GTA Online – slap a western sheen on the criminal fantasy and reap the rewards. But Rockstar has more ambitious plans to take the game in a new direction and make it distinct from GTA Online's crime-driven focus. Red Dead Online will always offer an outlaw fantasy for those who choose it, but Rockstar also has grand visions for growing the mode beyond combat encounters.

"We want to build something with Red Dead Online that feels authentic and right in the world of Red Dead," says Rockstar North co-head Rob Nelson. "You know, do things that maybe wouldn't make as much sense or wouldn't be available in the GTA world."

The role system could evolve to allow players to pursue more peaceful frontier fantasies like ranching and farming

While traders initially work out of their own camp, Rockstar could eventually allow players to set up business storefronts in Red Dead Online's towns

CHOOSE YOUR ROLE

The westward expansion was a historical period fueled by punchdrunk dreams of those who saw unlimited opportunity in the untamed American wilderness. Emboldened by the concept of manifest destiny, pioneers set across the United States to realize their destinies, whether it be through honest or nefarious means. Red Dead Online hopes to enable these fantasies as well, whether you want to roleplay as an honest woman harvesting your bounty from the untamed world, or a black-hat villain terrorizing towns across the land. To achieve this goal, Rockstar is thinking beyond the robust adversarial suite the game already has and investing more time and energy into free-roam activities.

"With Red Dead Online, we want to look at what we enjoyed about the open-world experience – the ability to feel like you were really existing in that world and you could role play in that world – and then extrapolate that out into what it could mean when you have a character that is truly your own," Nelson says. "We don't want to just pigeonhole you into being a criminal, but allow you a number of roles that you can take forward from the ground up."

Players will get their first taste of this new direction when Rockstar debuts three roles this summer. Enjoy the challenge of wrangling outlaws? Become a bounty hunter. Prefer the more primal thrill of tracking animals? Turn those valuable pelts into a trading business. Do you tend to lose yourself exploring the open world? Perhaps you can pursue a career as a collector. Players can invest time in multiple roles playing either solo or cooperatively, and each offers opportunities for honorable and dishonorable actions. The more time you invest in

Bounty hunting jobs involve both tracking down non-player characters and adversarial play

LEMOYNE
NATIO

Depending on their honor, the bounty hunter role could lead players down the path to becoming a lawman or outlaw

a role, the more unique rewards like weapons, outfits, and gadgets you can earn.

"We are trying to take what we think is special about the world and expand the level at which you can interact with that," Nelson says. "The goal is to be able to take hunting, collecting, bounty hunting, or whatever much further than we were able to with single-player. In some ways, we have to get [Red Dead Online] back up to the level of immersion that we were able to achieve with single-player. The scope for us to take it far beyond what we were able to do there is limitless, and that's really exciting."

The further players delve into these roles, the more recognizable and defined they should become to other players. At first glance, you should have a better idea of who you are dealing with. Say you're fishing along the bank of the river and a man wearing a black hat approaches. You know that only dishonorable bounty hunters can earn that specific hat style, so keeping an eye on him is a probably smart idea. Griefing is an unavoidable element of Red Dead Online right now, but Rockstar hopes these defined roles encourage players to interact in other ways as well. A bounty hunter may have more pressing matters to deal with than harassing an innocent fisherman. Perhaps he just tips his hat in your direction and rides past to tackle the more immediate task at hand.

These roles aren't meant to be a temporary progression path; Rockstar built each of these roles with expansion in mind. Whereas you started immediately as a CEO of your illegal business in GTA Online, the road to potential riches is a much longer journey in Red Dead Online.

"What we're doing with this game is asking what are the steps involved if it took you months, years, or whatever to get to that," Nelson says. "What would it be for you to start your business in your camp to becoming a Leviticus Cornwall and owning a railway or a mine?"

This approach gives Rockstar the freedom to tap into a lot of different Western fantasies. Perhaps the honorable bounty hunter eventually becomes a lawman. Maybe the successful trader eventually expands her business into a Saint Denis storefront. The door is open to expand and evolve these roles continually.

Nelson says the world technology is malleable enough to allow developers to add new elements as needed to serve these roles as well. "It's pretty exciting to be able to change the world for people so that it's not a static thing," he says. "It's evolving and players will have to evolve and adapt with it."

ENLISTING THE WILD BUNCH

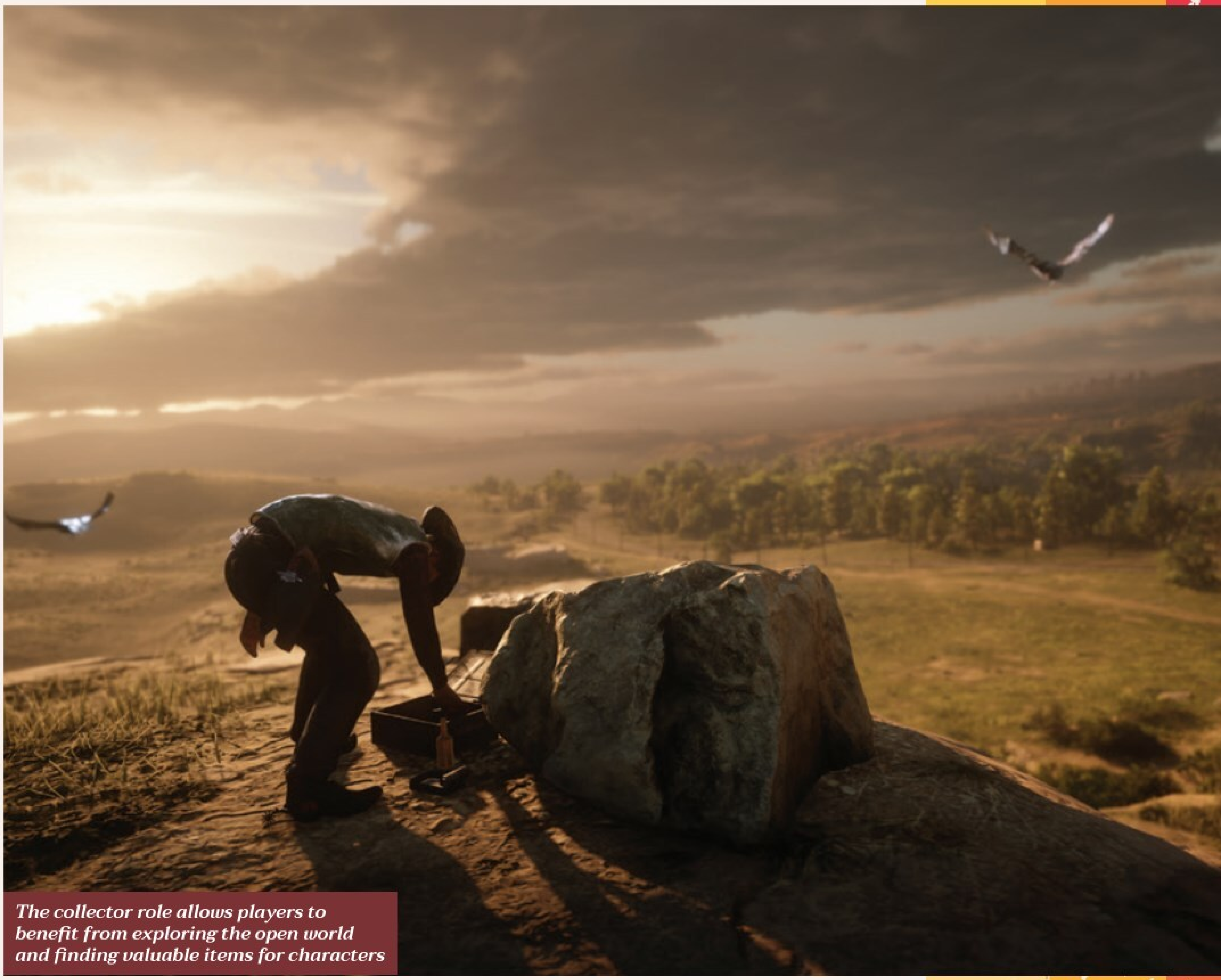
Examining the activities available in Red Dead Redemption II offers insight into the directions Rockstar could potentially take the online experience. The ranching and farming mechanics from the epilogue are ripe for conversion, as is building a homestead, running a riverboat gambling enterprise, or leading archaeological digs. These careers could be diverse enough to draw in fans of the single-player mode who are turned off by the current focus on competitive multiplayer online, and even attract the audience currently obsessed with the GTA RP scene.

The hope is these unique roles encourage players to intermingle in interesting ways, even those normally more inclined to keep to themselves. This overarching philosophy is why Rockstar is so apprehensive to introduce elements like a passive mode that walls off players from each other or free-aim servers that split the player base. "It would be easier for us to do that than what we're trying to do here, which is allow people to still feel like they are existing in the world that has an element of Wild Westiness to it and not completely make it two experiences," Nelson says. "If we can't get the balancing right then we can always do that, but what we're trying to do is allow people to, however they want to play the game, interact with the world and still feel like they're all part of the same world together. Where we think it works best and when it's the most fun is if you are actually able to roleplay in this world to a certain degree."

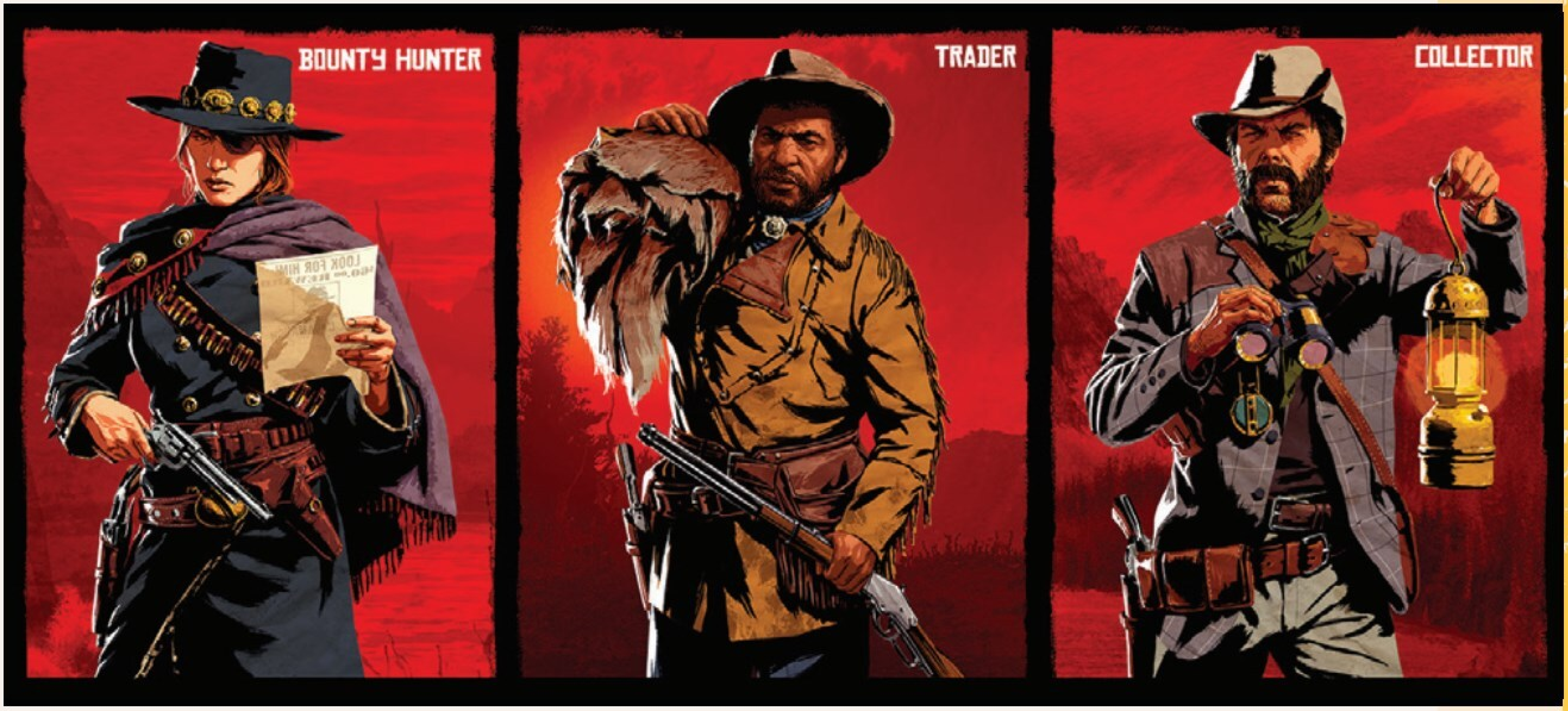
Achieving this goal won't be easy, which is why Rockstar turns to the community to help determine the ways these systems should evolve over time. "With single-player, you develop over a fairly lengthy period of time largely in isolation with your team, and then it comes out, and hopefully people like it and it resonates," Nelson says. "But the online component is more of a back and forth, almost like a conversation with the people playing it. You get to keep working on it in an interactive way."

The beta tag may be gone from Red Dead Online, but Rockstar still wants fans to offer their thoughts and opinions on this new direction as it experiments with ways to bring this vision to life.

"A lot of this stuff that we develop works for single player, but it needs to be reimagined to work in an online world where things are a little bit different," Nelson says. "That's going to be a big focus for us moving forward with every update – putting in as much new content to interact with as you explore the world to try and get it feeling as rich and deep as the single-player world was and eventually hopefully get richer and deeper." ◆



The collector role allows players to benefit from exploring the open world and finding valuable items for characters



MODERN WARFARE REIMAGINED AND REDEFINED

Infinity Ward brings **Call of Duty: Modern Warfare** back to a new age of hostilities and headlines

BY IMRAN KHAN

» PLATFORM
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» STYLE
1-Player Shooter
(Online TBA)

» PUBLISHER
Activision

» DEVELOPER
Infinity Ward

» RELEASE
October 25

A

Anyone who has followed Call of Duty for the last few years will remember Activision's insistence the series no longer needed a campaign in 2018. Instead, Activision bet hard on multiplayer modes, leaving fans who have long treated the annual Call of Duty campaign as a tradition out in the cold. It did not take long for Activision to realize the single-player story is an important facet of the Call of Duty experience, as Infinity Ward brings it back in style.

The newly announced Call of Duty: Modern Warfare is the latest game in the venerated subseries that launched Call of Duty into the stratosphere. Developer Infinity Ward uses careful wording to avoid calling it a reboot, but that term explains the new game well. Modern Warfare borrows its name from the 2007 title, but seeks to contemporize its story and place it within a 2019 context.

A lot of the same names and characters return, like Captain Price and his signature moustache, but they are reimagined as a new cast within today's environment. "The world has changed in the last 10 years," says narrative designer Taylor Kurosaki. "Modern Warfare has changed, too."

Jaws, Not Saw

Call of Duty has often had dalliances with real-world events, usually borrowing from the tone of present-day politics and global conflicts and extrapolating them into increasingly outlandish situations. No one would ever call the previous three Modern Warfare games realistic (much as the consultancy from military experts touts otherwise), but it is also incorrect to say they are completely divorced from real life. For this year's Modern Warfare, however, the intention is to pull from current events in a more deliberate and mature way than ever before.

This is why, as Kurosaki describes it, Modern Warfare seeks to be more like the movie *Jaws* than *Saw*. Rather than focus on gratuitousness and gore, Modern Warfare's story is intended to be a more subtle and sophisticated tale of when the world's problems come to our front doors. "Nuanced, relevant, and mature," Kurosaki reiterates, emphasizing the gray morality that pervades the news today.

The campaign follows two different perspectives to show both sides of a global conflict. On one side are the Tier 1 operators, militarized police, and soldiers with all the war resources they could ever need. The most expensive tactical assets are available to this side as they take on anti-terror missions designed to keep the homeland safe.

The other perspective belongs to freedom fighters from the Middle East. This side cannot keep up in terms of weaponry or armor, so they adopt guerrilla warfare strategies. While hopelessly outgunned, this contingent makes do by employing tactical creativity and a makeshift arsenal like improvised explosive devices.

Shades Of Gray

A car bomb goes off on a busy London street, and the search for the culprit leads police to a terrorist cell holed up in a townhouse. The government sends the Tier 1 Operators to take the head of the breakoff cell alive if possible, but otherwise obtain whatever plans the terrorists have or information leading to their leaders. Using night-vision goggles and breaching rounds, the Tier 1 operators break into the townhouse under the cover of darkness by shutting off the lights.

With the enemy totally blind, the operators rely heavily on night-vision goggles. Unlike previous games that effectively put a green filter on the world, Modern Warfare essentially redoes the entire lighting system to illuminate the darkness. It is possible to see an enemy's eyes dart to the side in the oppressive darkness of the building. The eerie silence of the neighborhood is only broken by the sounds of heavy boots stomping through the hallways, military jargon, and gunshots ringing out, creating a tense feeling as the player stalks the halls.

Slowly and systematically, the operators clear the floors of any resistance before finding a woman with a baby, who are the only people in the townhouse the operators do not shoot and kill. The player confronts the woman leading the cell, who seems to surrender at first – then she reaches for the detonator of a bomb that would take down the entire building underneath.

On the other side of the world, "Modern Warfare" becomes a bit of a misnomer, as the game flashes back to the origins of two Middle Eastern freedom fighters named Farah and Hadir when they were roughly seven years old. Through Farah's eyes, the player experiences a Russian attack on her small town, which is being butchered because of foreign intelligence claiming they were aiding terrorists. After Farah's mother is killed in a building collapse, her father tries to gather his children to escape, but is murdered by a Russian soldier in his home.

As the soldier stalks Farah and Hadir throughout their house, Farah sneaks around by crawling through vents and finds a screwdriver, which she uses to stab him in the thigh with a helpful prompt. The soldier, a hulking brute wearing a striped tanktop and a mask to breathe amidst the tear gas spewing from thrown canisters outside, knocks Farah to the ground and takes deadly aim at her head. Hadir grabs the screwdriver from the floor and stabs him in the neck, allowing the children to awkwardly hold up his gun and put a permanent end to their father's killer.

The two make an effort to escape the slaughter of their town by trying to reach the fields, only to find soldiers waiting around the perimeter. Farah slowly creeps through the fields, crouching below vision lines, until she can grab a soldier's abandoned pistol resting on a metal stool, prepared to shoot her way out when the demo abruptly ends.

Tough situations and brutal incursions appear in the story

PICTURE PERFECT

The remarkable visuals are one of the most notable changes to the new Modern Warfare. Infinity Ward adopted photogrammetry to achieve amazing, realistic portrayals of technologies like night vision and infrared.

"What it basically means is you take several hundred photos of an object, of a location, of characters, wardrobe, or equipment from different angles and the software stitches it together to make these incredibly realistic props, sets, and characters," says narrative designer Taylor Kurosaki. "Now having that data is one thing, but getting a game engine to take those assets and make sure they respond to light in a realistic way is a another endeavor. Data acquisition is one half of it, and the other is this new purpose-built engine."

Techniques like microtiling allow Infinity Ward to capture immaculate detail when you're up close to a door, an object, or a surface, but doesn't bog down the system rendering these when you're far away.

To get the most out of this technology, a team of engineers at Infinity Ward Poland created a new rendering pipeline for the engine. Not only can they incorporate all of the photogrammetry data, but this also allows for a totally accurate reproduction of night vision and thermal imaging technology from real-world counterparts. These are not filters or overlays placed "on top" of the visuals – flipping on thermal mode allows you to see heat down to the smallest details like recently turned-off truck engines.

Breach and clear dangerous rooms with your skilled squad

Advanced Modern Warfare

Infinity Ward places an emphasis on presenting the most stunning graphical and audio experience the series has ever seen, but it is not just the technology that has seen massive improvements. For a reboot of Modern Warfare, the studio examined every facet of the original game, from gun flow to sound to use of color.

"We don't want to be 'the brown game' anymore," says art director Joel Emslie, who came back to Infinity Ward after working on both Titanfall games at Respawn. "That meant taking a hard look at every single area in the game and deciding what we wanted it to look like."

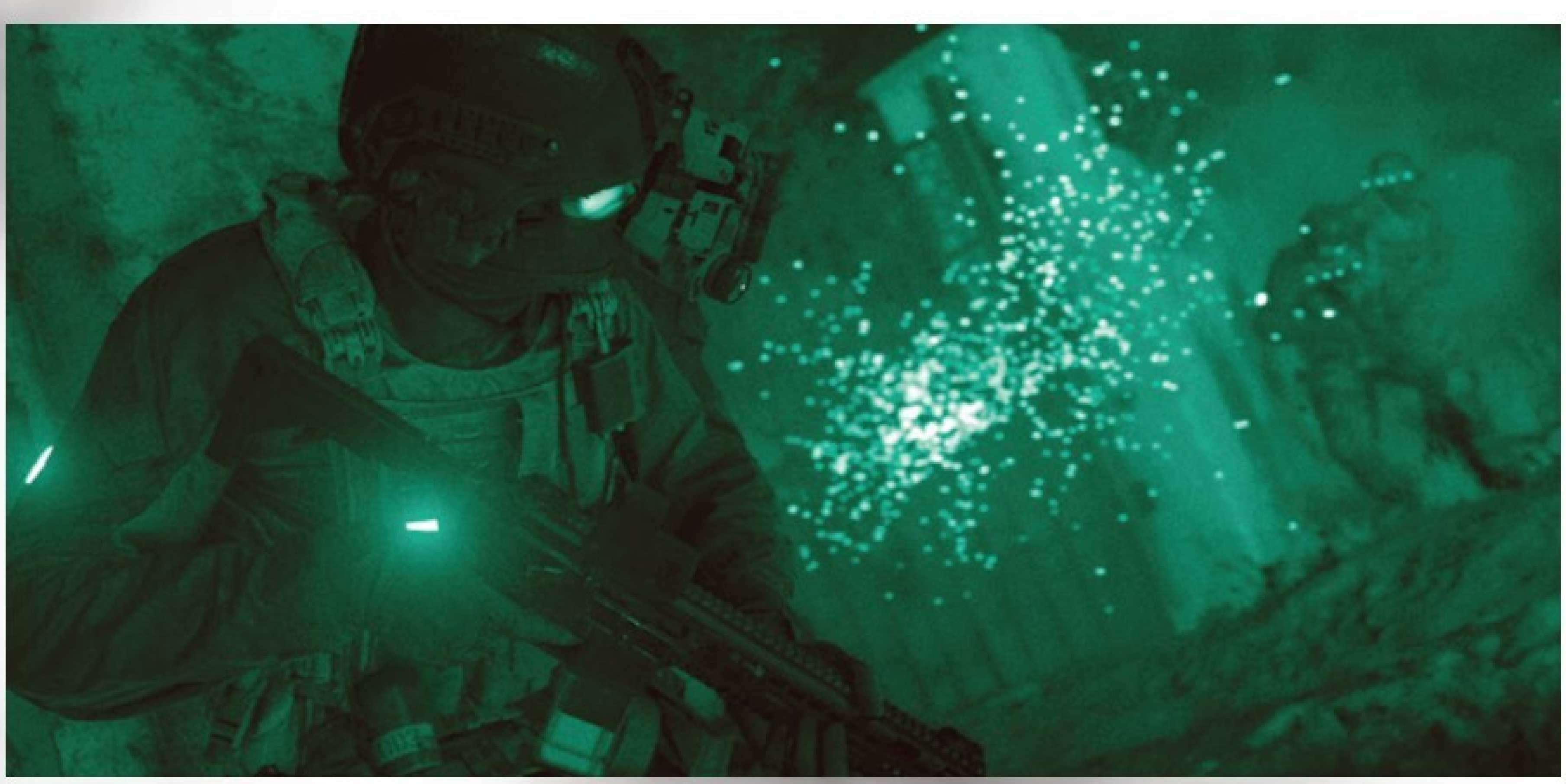
This was aided by a technology called photogrammetry, a modern design tool used in games like Battlefield 1 and The Vanishing of Ethan Carter that allows developers to scan in objects as photos and use them as extremely realistic textures to wrap around their 3D models (see sidebar). Adopting this technique for Modern Warfare allowed Infinity Ward to add a layer of visual realism that otherwise would have taken years of work. "It has been around a while, but only recently got really, really good," Emslie says.

For recreating a deserted car in the middle of a battlefield, Infinity Ward, which is local to areas affected by the recent California wildfires, politely asked someone with a singed vehicle if they could take photos for their game. They said yes.

Photogrammetry also gave Infinity Ward's new Krakow, Poland-based branch the opportunity to raise the bar for gun modeling in Modern Warfare. Every gun in the game has been scanned under different lighting circumstances to provide the best possible look to what the developers describe as the real star of the game. Guns now have different textures up close in a way that was not possible before, reflecting their actual differences.

This is not the only way guns differ from before. To give the aiming and camera a more realistic look, guns sway slightly behind the camera. At first blush, this feels a little swimmy, but it does not take more than a few seconds to get used to it and actually appreciate how much more sensible it feels to not have the gun attached to a direct pivot around the camera's neck. Combined with how many more ways the environment can react to gunfire, such as exploding vehicles, guns are decidedly a different beast this time around.

Modern Warfare's audio has also gotten a facelift with new 3D audio technology. Sounds authentically bounce off surfaces. As sound does not travel as fast as the speed of light, players will see a muzzle flash in the distance from a firing gun before hearing the sound arrive at their ears. Similarly, firing at targets 100 yards away produces a different sound profile than shooting that same object directly in front of the camera. This new audio technology is used to great effect within the actual gameplay, helping players judge at a moment's notice where their attention should be in a chaotic area.



The Inevitable Return

Reinvention is part of the Call of Duty DNA. The original Modern Warfare broke away from the series' World War II roots and was so successful it reshaped the trajectory of first-person shooters for years. Black Ops found its own identity with zombie mode and the recent Blackout battle royale. Other attempts at evolution like Ghosts, Advanced Warfare, and Infinite Warfare never quite caught on in the same way, which is why it's not terribly surprising Activision resurrected Modern Warfare with a contemporary reimagining of one of its most beloved games.

Right now, Infinity Ward is focused on explaining how the game's more mature and subtle campaign can effectively evolve the way Call of Duty stories are made, but there is still the open question of how Modern Warfare plans to evolve the competitive multiplayer modes. That conversation will have to wait until later this year, but the studio is always looking at feedback for all aspects of the game.

Whether Call of Duty ever really needs a single-player portion or not is somewhat of a moot point, because Infinity Ward believes it can deliver the best one the series has seen yet with Modern Warfare. ◆

Ghost Recon Breakpoint

The Ghosts head to fantasy island

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Shooter
(8-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Ubisoft

» **Developer**
Ubisoft Paris

» **Release**
October 4

Launched two years ago, Ghost Recon Wildlands catapulted the longtime Tom Clancy series in a new trajectory armed with an expansive (some might say excessive) open-world, untethered cooperative play for up to four players, and an evolving experience that is still being updated to this day. The same development team that shipped Wildlands and delivered 19 title updates in the last two years has ballooned to more than 1,000 developers, and it has some ambitious and surprising plans for its follow-up.

Ghost Recon has always been set in real-world locations during fictitious geopolitical skirmishes. This time, the special operatives go off the grid to an island that doesn't really exist. Aurora is a sprawling, make-believe island in the Pacific Ocean packed with snowy mountain peaks, sandy beaches, jungles, and volcanos. The diversity sounds nice, even if the tonal shift is abrupt. "Creating a fictional setting gives us immeasurable license to expand on the world," says Breakpoint writer Emil Daubon. "We can create a variety of terrain with a variety of physical and social landscapes that you have to navigate, and we can expand on it as we choose. That's a really exciting aspect."

This picturesque location is home to Skell Technology, a corporation that develops advanced A.I. and drones. Nomad's team of Ghosts are sent in after the world mysteriously loses communication with the island. Turns out the culprit is someone Nomad is intimately familiar with – his former compatriot Cole D. Walker, played by Jon Bernthal (*The Punisher*, *The Walking Dead*). Radicalized over the past few years, Walker has teamed up with a deadly team of former spec ops soldiers called the Wolves. Armed with the same training and capabilities as the Ghosts, as well as a fleet of weaponized drones and robotic sentries, expect to face a much more dangerous threat than any of the factions you fought in Wildlands.

Adopting a fictitious setting doesn't mean Ghost Recon Breakpoint is all fantasy. A dedicated subsection of Ghost Recon fans constantly bangs the drum for adding more realism to the tactical experience. Ubisoft heeds these calls for a more hardcore military experience with new features like persistent injuries, more varied close-quarters takedowns, a torch for breaching fences, the ability to pick up and hide bodies, and an active camo system that lets you blend with your environment

Playing single-player? Then you won't have any A.I. squadmates to back you up this time

In Breakpoint the Ghosts square off with the Wolves, a dangerous group of defected special operators

like Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Predator*. Ubisoft also says vehicle handling is "greatly improved."

You can play through the entire campaign with four players online, but unfortunately solo players no longer have the backup of A.I. companions. This means no one riding shotgun in vehicles returning fire or resurrecting you if you take too many bullets, but you still can pull of sync shots with the help of weaponized drones.

Breakpoint ships with competitive multiplayer out of the gate, and your progression tracks across both the campaign and PvP. Ubisoft also has grand plans for post-launch content, including new storylines, seasonal events, and even cooperative raids. Look for more intel on how this project is shaping up in the coming months.
» **Matt Bertz**

The enemy forces are led by former Ghost Cole D. Walker, who is played by *The Punisher* actor Jon Bernthal

Borderlands 3

More guns, more worlds, and more characters

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Shooter
(4-Player Online)

» Publisher
2K Games

» Developer
Gearbox Software

» Release
September 13

Few large game series embody the I'll-do-what-I-want game design philosophy better than Borderlands, which has gone from a self-serious shooter to a genre hybrid mix to a steadfast stalwart of old-school game design all within the same decade. In the years since fans first fell in love with Borderlands, developer Gearbox has been hard at work at figuring out exactly what makes the games tick and how exactly you improve upon those foundations without upending them. With Borderlands 3, they might just have hit that near-impossible moving target.

When Borderlands 3 was revealed, the operative keyword to its entire being was simply "more." More guns, more characters, more worlds, even more guns, and a story that promised to dwarf its predecessors in size and scope. By the numbers, this is a totally accurate summation of what Borderlands 3 aspires to be: a billion guns, venturing outside of Pandora and its orbiting moon for the first time, and fighting back against a cult that seeks to control the entire universe.

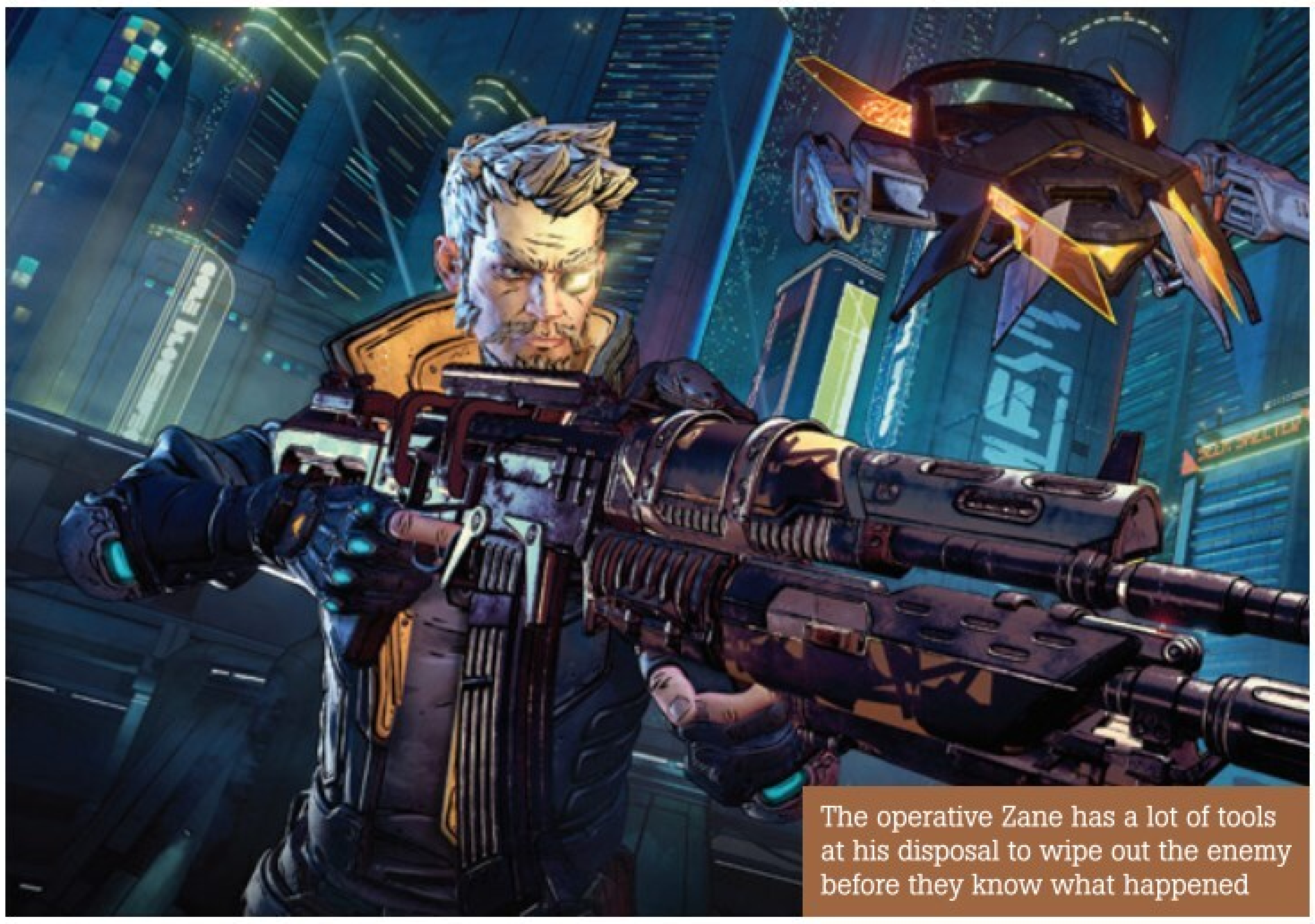
The leaders of this cult are Tyreen and Troy, a Siren and her brother respectively, who are using all the power they wield as social media influencers to control the Children of the Vault as their followers. Tyreen is searching for every vault in the known universe so she can use her Siren powers to absorb the guardian monsters. A resistance force made up primarily of former Borderlands playable characters is recruiting a new set of vault hunters to help stop her, which is where the player comes in.

Borderlands 3 contains a number of new vault hunters, of which only the Siren Amara and the Operative Zane have been detailed. Amara is the bruiser of the group, using her powers to create astral projections that pack a punch, like a crater-creating ground slam that damages all the enemies in the immediate area. Zane has a trusty drone to call in to aid him in battle and fire on enemies even when he's catching his breath behind a wall. The older gentleman also works a bit like Zer0 from Borderlands 2, creating decoys that he can also trade places with at a moment's notice, making him ideal for strategic and evasive players.

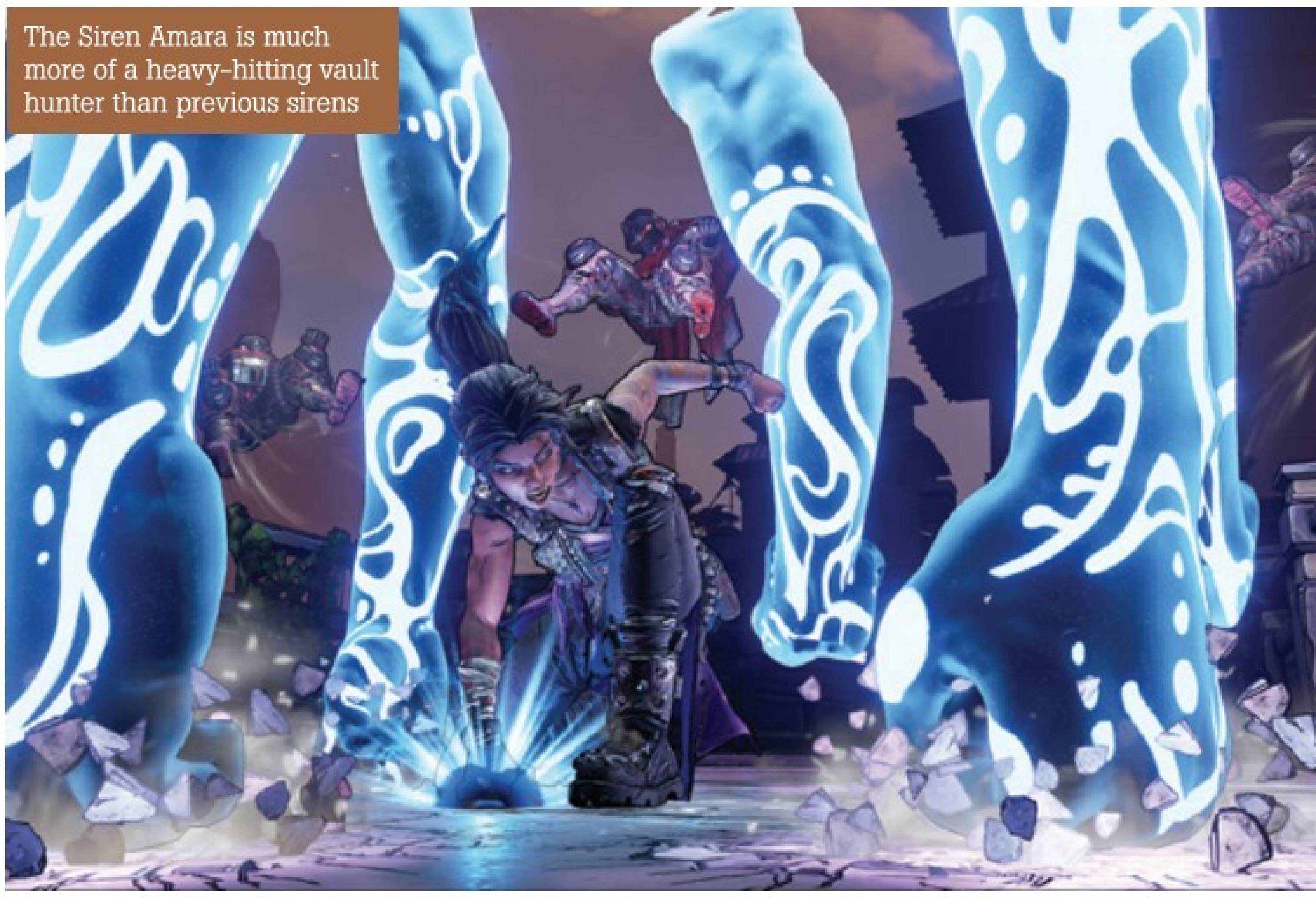
The former Borderlands 2 ninja makes a fairly significant cameo in the third game's mission on Promethea, in the corporate-owned city of Meridian. Rhys, one of the protagonists from Telltale's Tales from the Borderlands, is the new head honcho of the Atlas corporation after the events of Borderlands 2 and Tales took control away from Handsome Jack. A rival corporation is eager to wrest Atlas from Rhys' hands through brute force (Borderlands' version of a corporate takeover), which brings resistance members like Zer0 and vault hunters alike to make sure Atlas' research into vault locations does not fall into the wrong hands.

During the story missions, Borderlands 3 passes you along to different A.I. partners like Zer0 or Rhys' commander Lorelei to aid you like a human player might. Even if you are playing the game alone, A.I. partners watch your back during battles or pick you up if you fall, a feature previously only offered to multiplayer sessions. Thankfully, you never have to fight over who gets what loot with the A.I., though that is now a concern of the past even with friends with the new instanced loot feature.

In Borderlands 3, when players of disparate levels join together in a group, an optional toggle for instanced loot means all players can pick up whatever guns and shields and items they want without fear of the other players losing out. Every player gets their own version of the loot at a level appropriate to them. Additionally, everyone faces an enemy with damage and health proportional to their own level, meaning players should be



The operative Zane has a lot of tools at his disposal to wipe out the enemy before they know what happened



The Siren Amara is much more of a heavy-hitting vault hunter than previous sirens

challenged regardless of what level the mission expects them to be. You can also just turn this off and play Borderlands 3 how the previous games worked, as well.

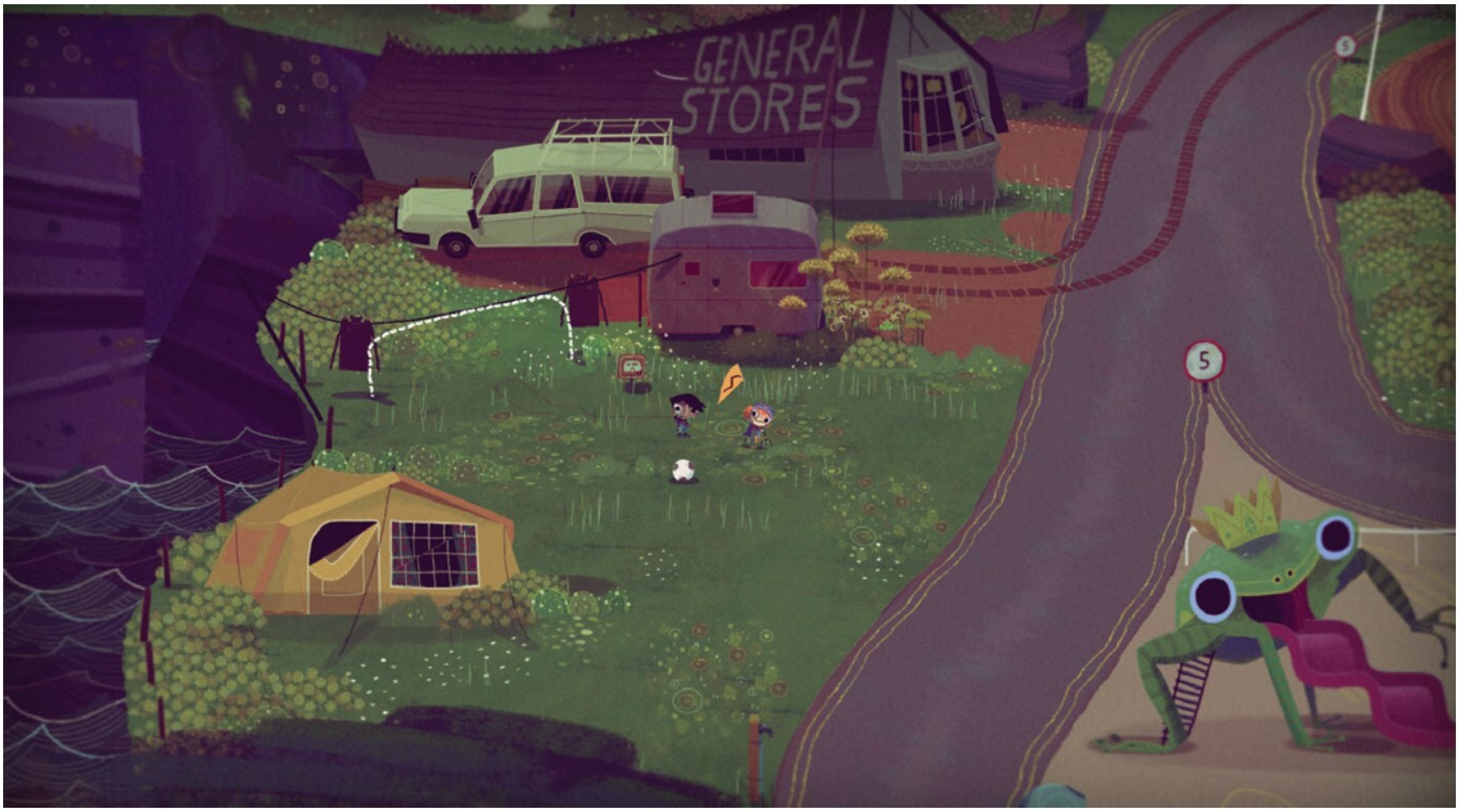
The guns themselves have more variations than ever, including minor ones like scopes and sights up to major changes like elements and different types of alternative fire modes. Players can now change the way guns function by switching fire modes, which can change the element of a shot so you can maximize damage or even turn an assault rifle into a rocket launcher for when you really need a room-clearer. Carry enough weapons with a different variety of alternative firing modes and you effectively double the arsenal on your person, allowing you to create the build you want to play with your vault hunter.

Borderlands 3 is sure of its identity and what it wants to be: the further adventures of Borderlands. It is unconcerned with what other games are doing or where the industry as a whole is going, and is every bit the rebellious youth the first and second games set out to be by sticking to its own definitions of self-realization. This is likely to be the game fans have been waiting for.
» **Imran Khan**

Borderlands 3 will take place on different planets with all new environments and monsters to shoot

Knights And Bikes

Like being a kid again



» Platform
PS4 • PC

» Style
1 or 2-Player
Action/Adventure
(2-Player Online)

» Publisher
Double Fine Presents

» Developer
Foam Sword

» Release
Summer

If entertainment media has taught us anything about kids in the '80s, it's this: They loved getting into mischief, and they loved riding their bikes. Developer Foam Sword is tapping into those truths with Knights and Bikes, an action/adventure game featuring two girls on the fictional British island of Penfurzy. While tales like this usually come with a dose of danger (see *Stranger Things* or *The Goonies*), the early segment of Knights and Bikes I played was light on menace and heavy on charm.

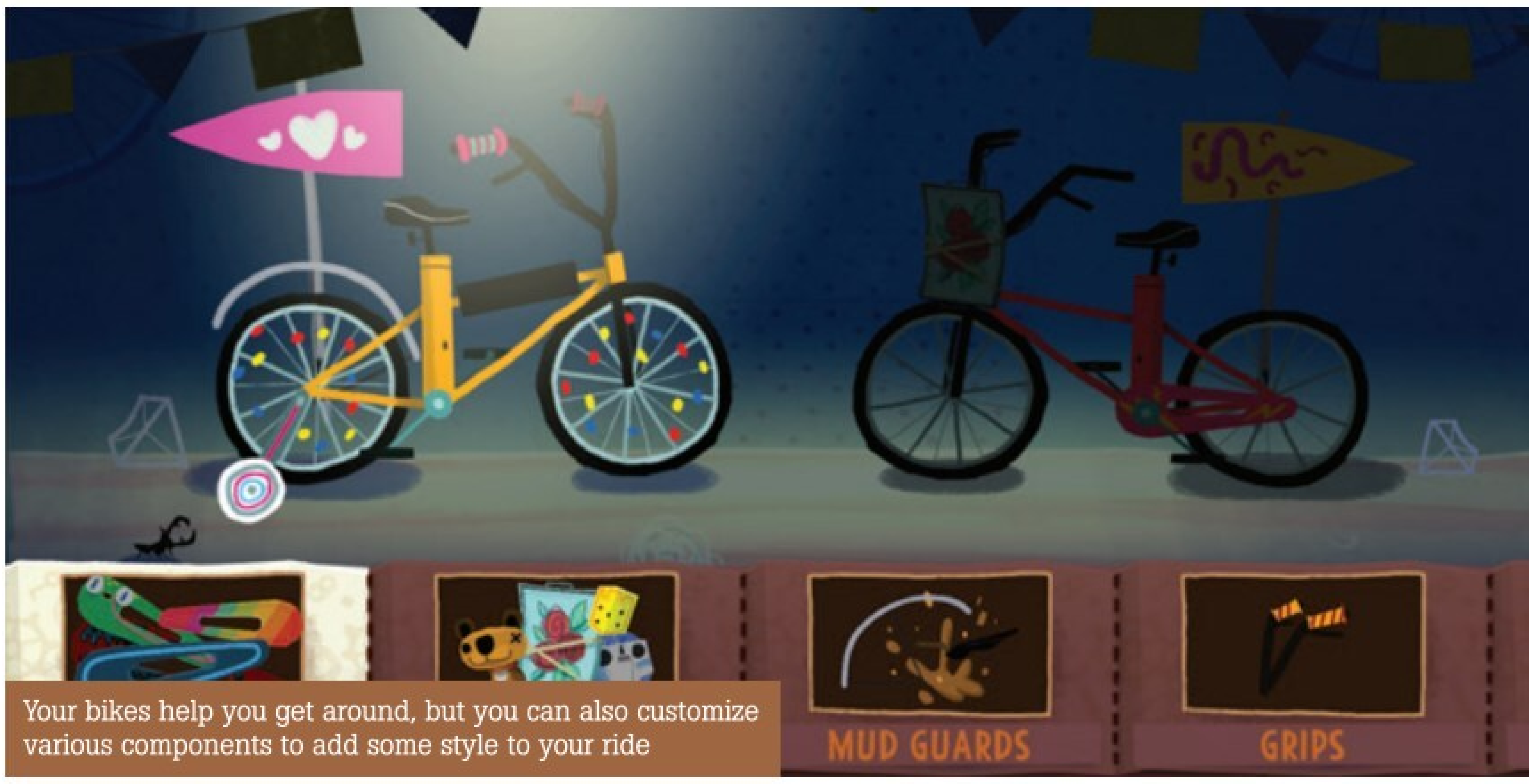
The story follows Demelza and Nessa, new friends who meet in the opening scenes, but then set out to explore the island together. The gorgeous 2D art is instantly striking, with expressive characters and colorful surroundings that give Penfurzy a hand-painted storybook quality. You walk (and ride) around the world as both girls – either swapping between them as a solo player, or controlling one while a friend controls the other via online or local co-op.

The beginning of Knights and Bikes is lighthearted, focused on establishing the characters and setting. Most of my time is spent guiding Demelza and Nessa through a tourist attraction that explains a legend involving knights and hidden treasure on the island. Both girls have slightly different attacks, but I mainly use them against harmless targets to lower barriers and reach the next scene. That's fine, because the clever dialogue and beautiful visuals are engaging enough to hold my interest for now, along with the mysteries they present. What is Nessa really after? What happened to Demelza's mom? Why is "knights" half of the game's title?

Combat might pick up later, but at this early phase, the gameplay primarily reinforces how players view Penfurzy from a child's perspective. The girls make goofy sounds when they run. They do chores, disobey parents, and customize their bikes. Demelza stomps in puddles. Nessa throws Frisbees. All of this draws a distinct line between the lives of kids and adults on the island – something that will undoubtedly be important as the tale unfolds. Though my demo ends before the central conflict emerges, I know it involves the girls coming to the adults' rescue and saving the day.

Knights and Bikes provides simple fun, but its biggest strength (so far, at least) is the appeal of the characters and the world they inhabit. In addition to an alluring aesthetic, the island of Penfurzy is home to plenty of humor, mayhem, and mystery. Combine all that with a hint of darkness and you have everything needed to assemble a memorable coming-of-age story.

» **Joe Juba**



Your bikes help you get around, but you can also customize various components to add some style to your ride

Death Stranding

Fighting to make connections

» Platform
PS4

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Sony Interactive Entertainment

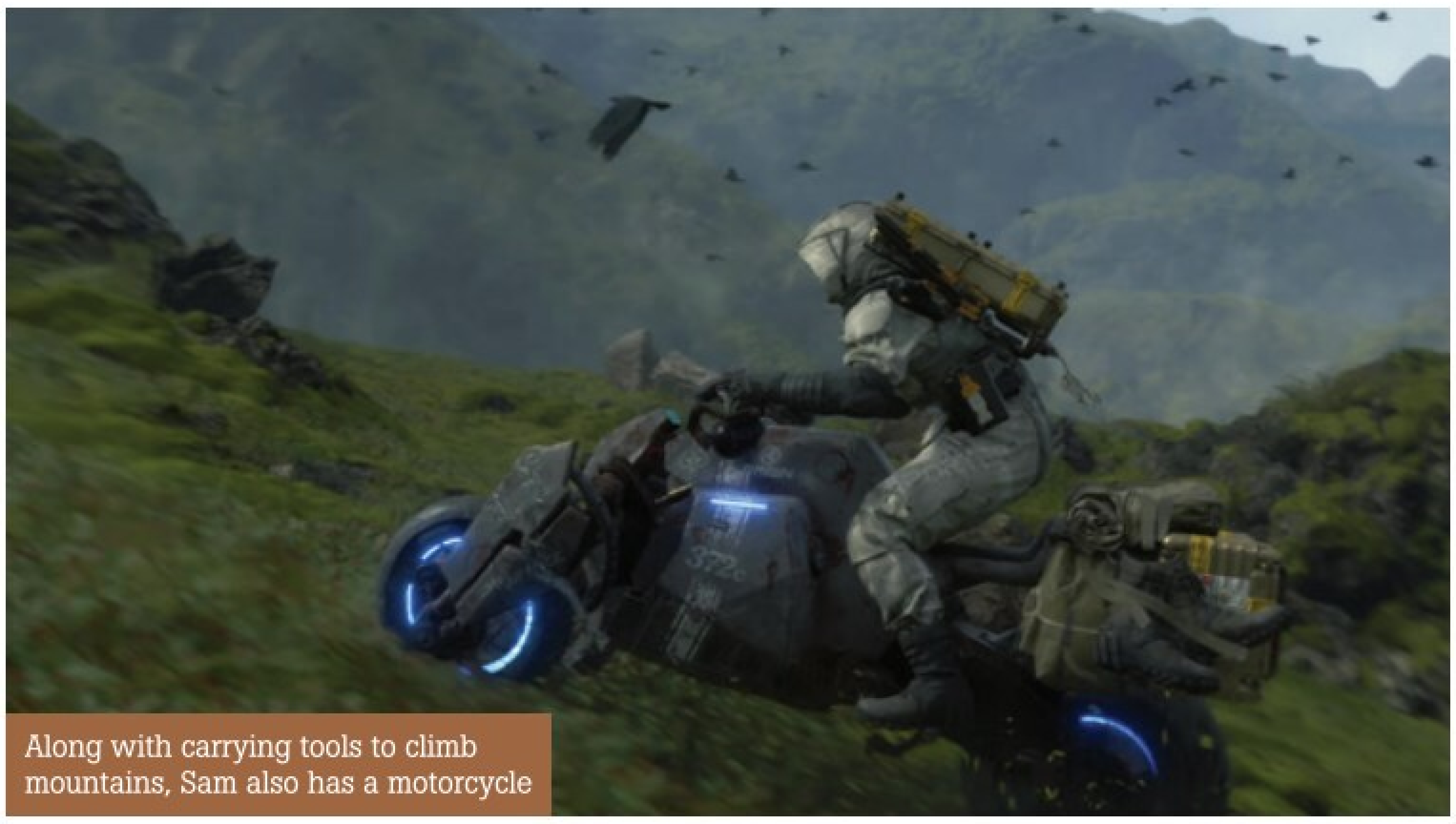
» Developer
Kojima Productions

» Release
November 8

From its initial reveal, Death Stranding has always been an engaging mystery. Oil-soaked ocean life covered white beaches while shadowy creatures loomed above in the sky. Follow-up trailers and cryptic quotes from the actors involved in Death Stranding's production did little to illuminate what Metal Gear creator Hideo Kojima's next project would be about, but Kojima Productions' latest update is finally offering some worthwhile details.

While many specifics remain vague, we know the game is set in a near-future version of Earth that has been ravaged by explosions, leading to a series of supernatural events known as the Death Stranding. Humanity is on the verge of extinction and the player character, Sam Bridges (Norman Reedus), must explore the wasteland in order to save humankind.

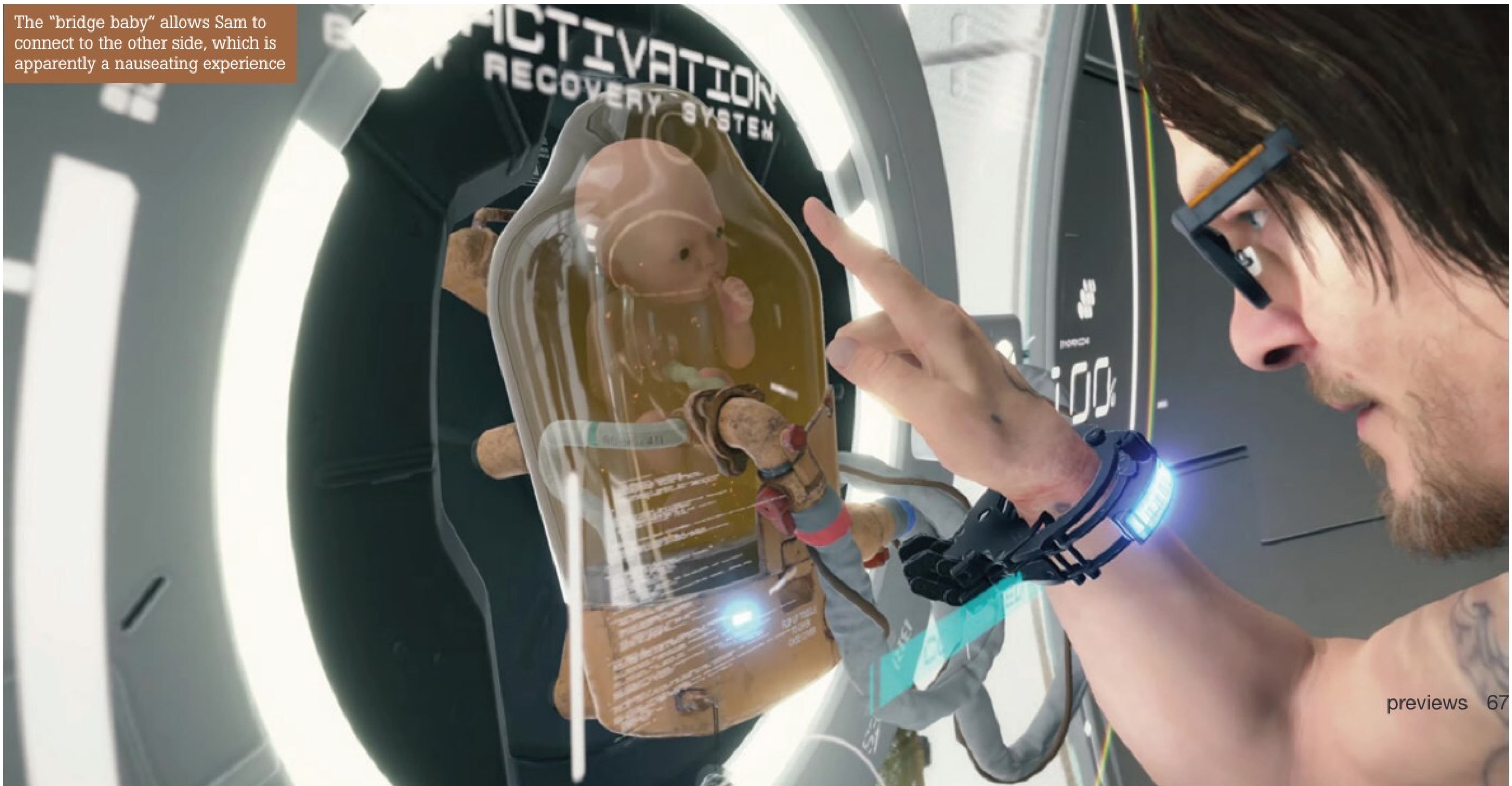
Working for the United Cities of America, it seems Sam doesn't believe in the cause. Assorted characters, including the president, plead with him to help unite the world. They tell Sam the only way to recover the world is to build connections, to which Sam replies, "Rebuilding America isn't going to get rid of the BTs." These BTs are an invisible, supernatural threat to this new world. And what's up with those babies floating in containers? That element still isn't totally clear, but they are referred to as "bridge babies," and they allow those who have them to "plug into the other side."


Along with carrying tools to climb mountains, Sam also has a motorcycle

Kojima Productions also provided new information and context surrounding Death Stranding's gameplay mechanics – the most mysterious part of the game until now. Sam climbs with portable ladders and rappels down cliffsides, but there's more to the action than traversal. When he is pursued by enemies, Sam uses melee and gun combat to eliminate the threats, though it also appears he can avoid enemies using stealth. Sam and his foes can also use vehicles.

Death Stranding's cast continues to get stranger and more star-studded. Characters seen in previous reveals now have official and unconventional names, like Deadman (Guillermo del Toro), Fragile (Léa Seydoux), and Cliff (Mads Mikkelsen). Other key players include Mama (Margaret Qualley), Heartman (Nicolas Winding Refn), and Die-Hardman (Tommie Early Jenkins), who may just overtake Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker's Hot Coldman in the race for most ridiculous name Kojima has actually used in a game. Higgs (played by Troy Baker) is a character who seems to have special abilities. He says, "It's hard to make connections when you can't shake hands," and implies that he has a better understanding of the Death Stranding phenomenon than the average human.

Extrapolating Death Stranding's full story and themes without having experienced the complete game is impossible, but like Kojima's Metal Gear series, it seems to explore human connection in a technologically advanced age. At one point, Sam says, "Covering the world in cable didn't bring an end to war and suffering," and he warns that trying to do it again will not solve this new world's problems. So, what will bring humanity back from the brink of disaster? We may have to wait until Death Stranding's November 8 release before we can answer that with any certainty. » **Kyle Hilliard**


The "bridge baby" allows Sam to connect to the other side, which is apparently a nauseating experience

Code Vein

Bandai Namco's Souls-like readies for battle

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Bandai Namco

» Developer
Bandai Namco

» Release
2019

With certain genres, you know instinctively how something should move and feel before you ever lay your hands on the controller. For better or worse, From Software's Souls games have set a standard against which all similar games are compared. This is the context in which Bandai Namco introduced the world to Code Vein, its own take on the Souls formula with a few differences that it hopes make it distinctive.

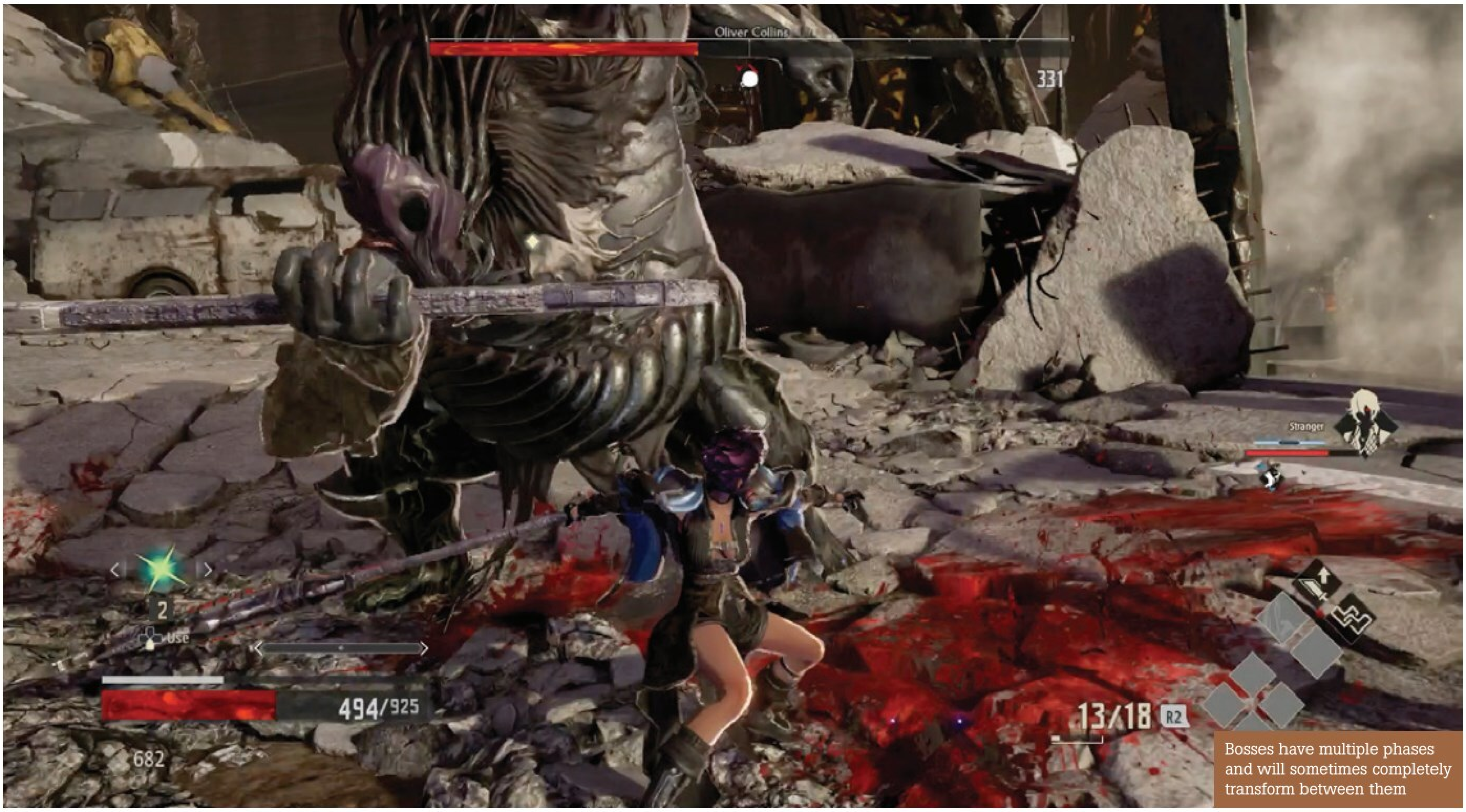
Code Vein comes to us by way of the God Eater team, a Monster Hunter-like action game that distinguished itself from its competition with a faster battle system and larger emphasis on story. Their newest project was originally intended to release in September of 2018, but saw a hefty delay weeks before its release date, something producer Keita Iizuka says is owed to a desire to leverage their unique talents on making the game separate from its contemporaries.

"We're definitely excited to hear the name Dark Souls come up next to our game, it's popular and we're very honored that Code Vein is considered on the same playing field," Iizuka says. "However, one of the things we wanted to capitalize on with our talents is the ability to write a dramatic story. The other aspect is the action of taking something from the enemy to give you additional powers."

Much like the God Eater team's other games, the theme of consumption is a focus within Code Vein. The city has become an encapsulated warzone where vampires, who subsist on human blood, are quickly running low on their supply. As a revenant yourself, you can pull the blood from enemies and empower yourself to become stronger or buff your skills to better survive the bloody apocalypse.

The story is told through cutscenes primarily, but also interaction with numerous NPC partners you meet along the way, one of the differentiators the team is hanging their hat on. Rather than summon human players for help, named and written characters join you along your journey, working alongside you in battle and expositing on the state of the world. In the first example of this, the protagonist's partner Oliver Collins is wounded in battle, only to later reemerge as a boss fight driven mad through blood starvation. After Oliver is defeated, the protagonist picks up his vestige, a crystalized form of his memories, showing the path he followed to end up working for the vampires in the city.

According to Iizuka, this is just one example of how Code Vein's story allows it to stand out in a crowded field of Souls-like games. We will see for ourselves if it can rise above when the game releases later this year. » **Imran Khan**



Bosses have multiple phases and will sometimes completely transform between them

Madden NFL 20

New faces and features for the franchise

SCHWARTZ
71
15
DUVERNAY
5

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1 to 4-Player Sports (6-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
EA Sports

» **Developer**
EA Tiburon

» **Release**
August 2

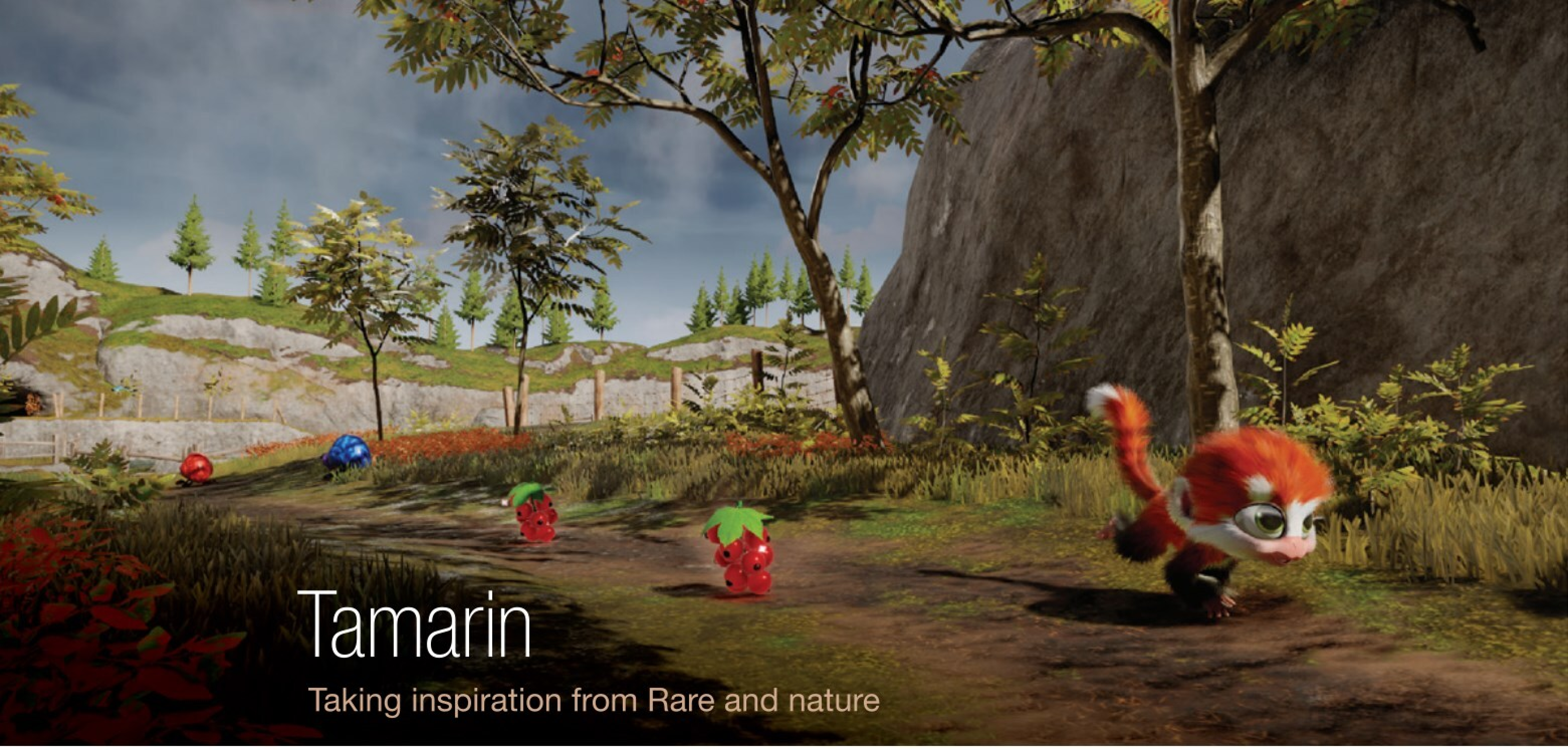
Just like a football team has offense, defense, and special teams units that make up the general strength of the team, the Madden franchise has its own divisions that contribute to the game as a whole. Even though last year's title changed its player progression system, recent iterations of Madden's Franchise mode (CFM) haven't evolved this portion of the series enough. Looking to not only improve CFM but also other modes and elements, developer EA Tiburon is hoping that a few key additions can help lift the entire series in multiple ways.

There is no shortage of drama and intrigue in the NFL, but this isn't something Madden has always conveyed well. The new Face of the Franchise: QB1 career mode hopes to tap into this in ways the Longshot story mode did not by letting you play and make choices as a franchise QB. Starring in the college playoff (you sculpt your likeness and pick from 10 real college teams), through the combine and draft, and on your way to NFL stardom, you'll play games, forge who you are as a player, and make decisions that affect the future of you and your team.

Madden 20's Scenario Engine brings forth situations like dealing with losses, prima donna teammates, and going up against star players. Your choices reverberate forward and shape you as a player by affecting morale with your teammates, boosting your attributes, and more. The Scenario Engine is also used in the regular franchise mode, so as a coach you might have to deal with players-only meetings or whether to rest players on a short week alongside setting and meeting goals for XP rewards.

Another way EA Tiburon hopes to inject Madden with juice and give players differentiation from each other is through Superstar abilities and X-Factor players. Over 140 Superstar abilities give high-rated players specific, defining boosts like Patrick Mahomes being able to throw across his body with accuracy or Julio Jones getting separation on post routes. Furthermore, a rarefied number of approximately 50 players have X-Factor abilities that go a step further when that player executes specific goals in a game and gets in the zone. For example, when Tom Brady is in the zone, his X-Factor ability further highlights his first open receiver with a larger field icon. Like the Scenario Engine benefiting Franchise mode as well as Face of the Franchise, Superstar and X-Factor abilities are present throughout the game, letting you build your Face of the Franchise player into a game-changer through different Superstar ability loadouts, draft a prospect and unlock their X-Factor ability in Franchise mode, or give your Ultimate Team lineup a leg up.

Madden 20's new features will have to be balanced correctly (the distribution of player ratings is also being spread out more), manifest intelligently, and be more than surface deep if they are to give gamers more dramatic choices and make the game feel different from play to play and season to season. This is a tall task for a series whose last entry was marred with bugs and gameplay complaints – which EA Tiburon is also working on correcting. Team rebuilds are rarely pulled off in a single season, but you've got to start somewhere, and the developer has at least identified some important areas that need attention. » **Matthew Kato**



Tamarin

Taking inspiration from Rare and nature

» **Platform**
PS4 • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Chameleon Games

» **Developer**
Chameleon Games

» **Release**
Summer

Omar Sawi has been working on Tamarin for more than five years. As the name hints, the adventure is about a tamarin, a small species of adorable monkey found mostly in Central and South America. You are a member of a tamarin family whose home has been destroyed by invading insects from underground. It's up to you to push back against the insects, liberate your home, and save your family by exploring, finding weapons, and using them.

The ant enemies in the game look similar to Rare's 1999 sci-fi N64 game, Jet Force Gemini, and that comparison is no accident. Sawi is a fan of that era of Rare platformer and brought on former Rare employees to help with development. Sawi's most consistent collaborator is Richard Vaucher, who worked on Donkey Kong 64 as well as Kameo: Elements of Power with Rare. The soundtrack comes from David Wise, who is best known for his work on Donkey Kong Country's score, and the snippets we heard were reminiscent of Wise's previous work.

During the demo, the tamarin protagonist pulled off familiar 3D platforming moves like slamming the ground mid-jump and executing sprawling sideways flips. Early in the game, you find a submachine gun to use against the insect threat. In these sections, Tamarin looks closer to a third-person shooter. Much like Jet Force Gemini, the ants' heads can pop off with a well-aimed blast, though Sawi says you cannot collect the severed heads. The main collectibles are fireflies, which try to outrun you when you get close. After collecting a few, a new pathway opened and Sawi moved on to some different locations.

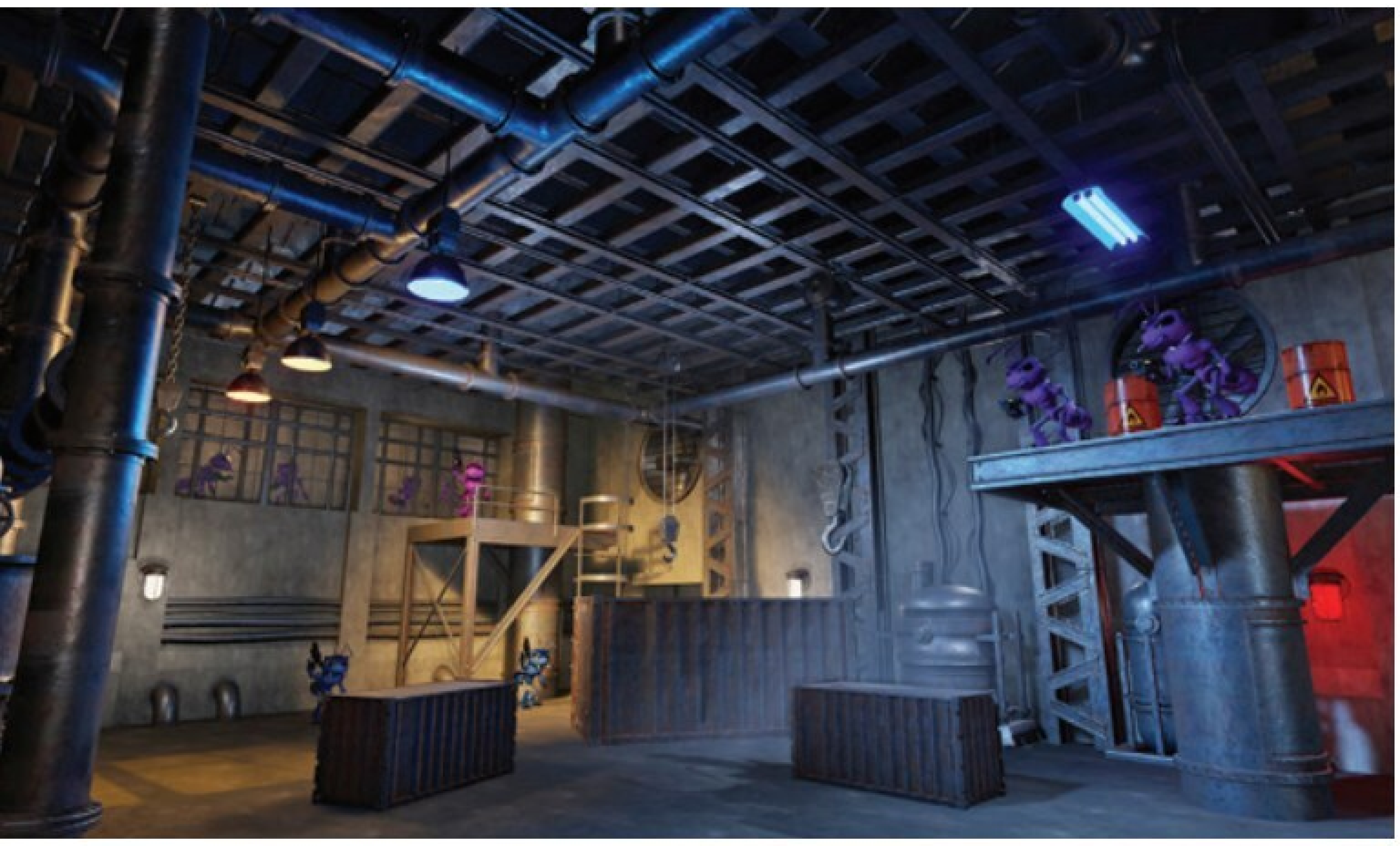
Tamarin isn't an open-world game, but does feature large, open levels that encourage you to explore in any direction you want once you're past the early tutorials. Sawi also showed off a later level in a factory filled with dancing, celebrating insects who stopped their festivities the moment they started receiving gunfire.

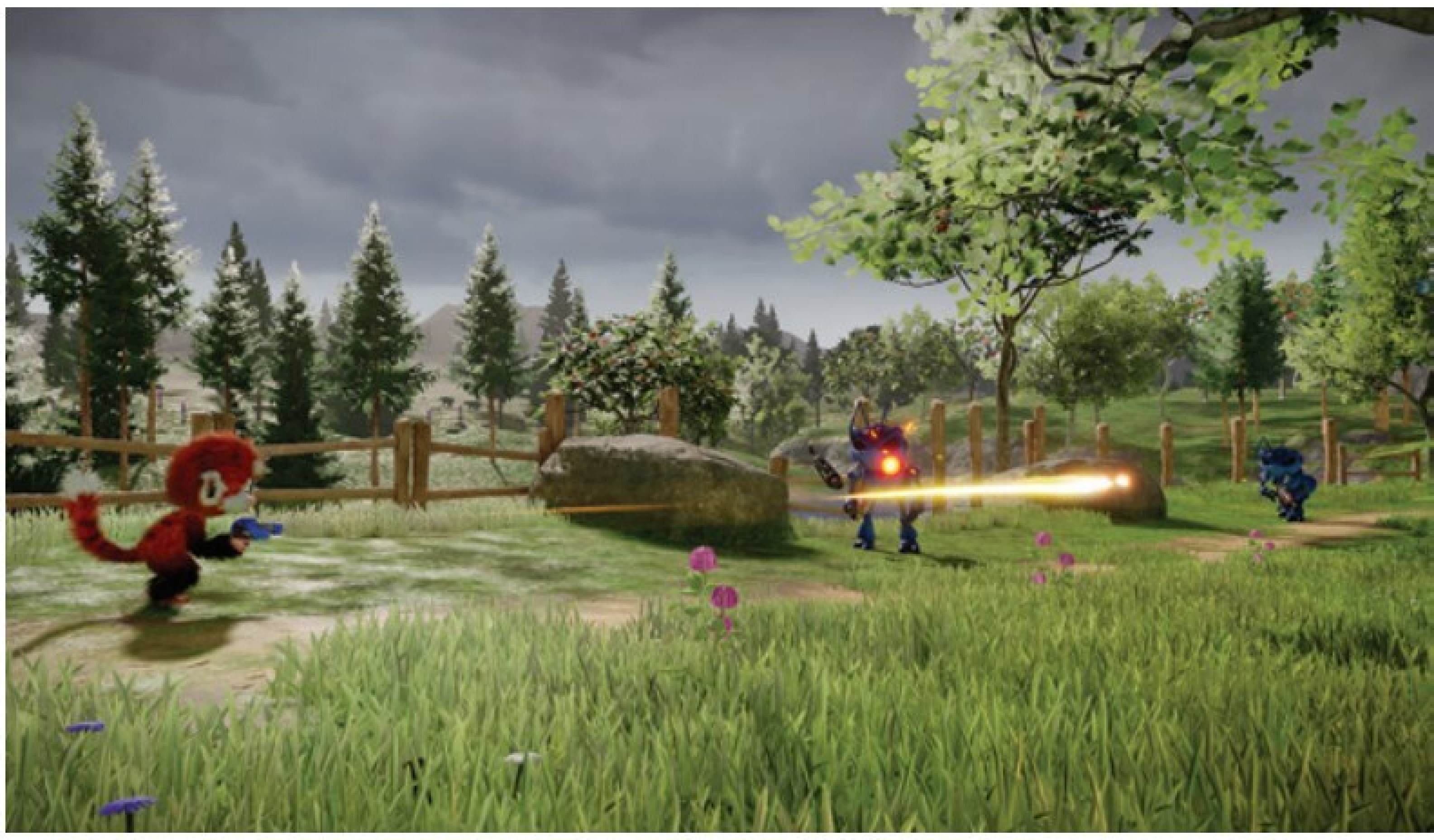
When asked what genre Tamarin is, Vaucher and Sawi struggled to come up with a singular answer, but that's part of the game's goal. Sawi wants the gameplay to change as you progress between relaxing exploration and platforming, and exciting third-person shooting.

Despite Tamarin's relationship to Rare's past, it is not meant to be a spiritual successor or unofficial sequel to Jet Force Gemini. "It's trying to capture that era of game. Not necessarily create a sequel," Vaucher says.

"I love that game, but we weren't trying to make a spiritual successor of any one game. We were just really inspired by all the Rare games," Sawi adds. "It's always more inspiring to do something new."

Sawi says Tamarin's main inspiration is nature and his home, Norway, with the invading insects representing the threat of pollution. "We need to take care of nature. It's very beautiful, so we try to get across some of that beauty at the budget we had." » **Kyle Hilliard**



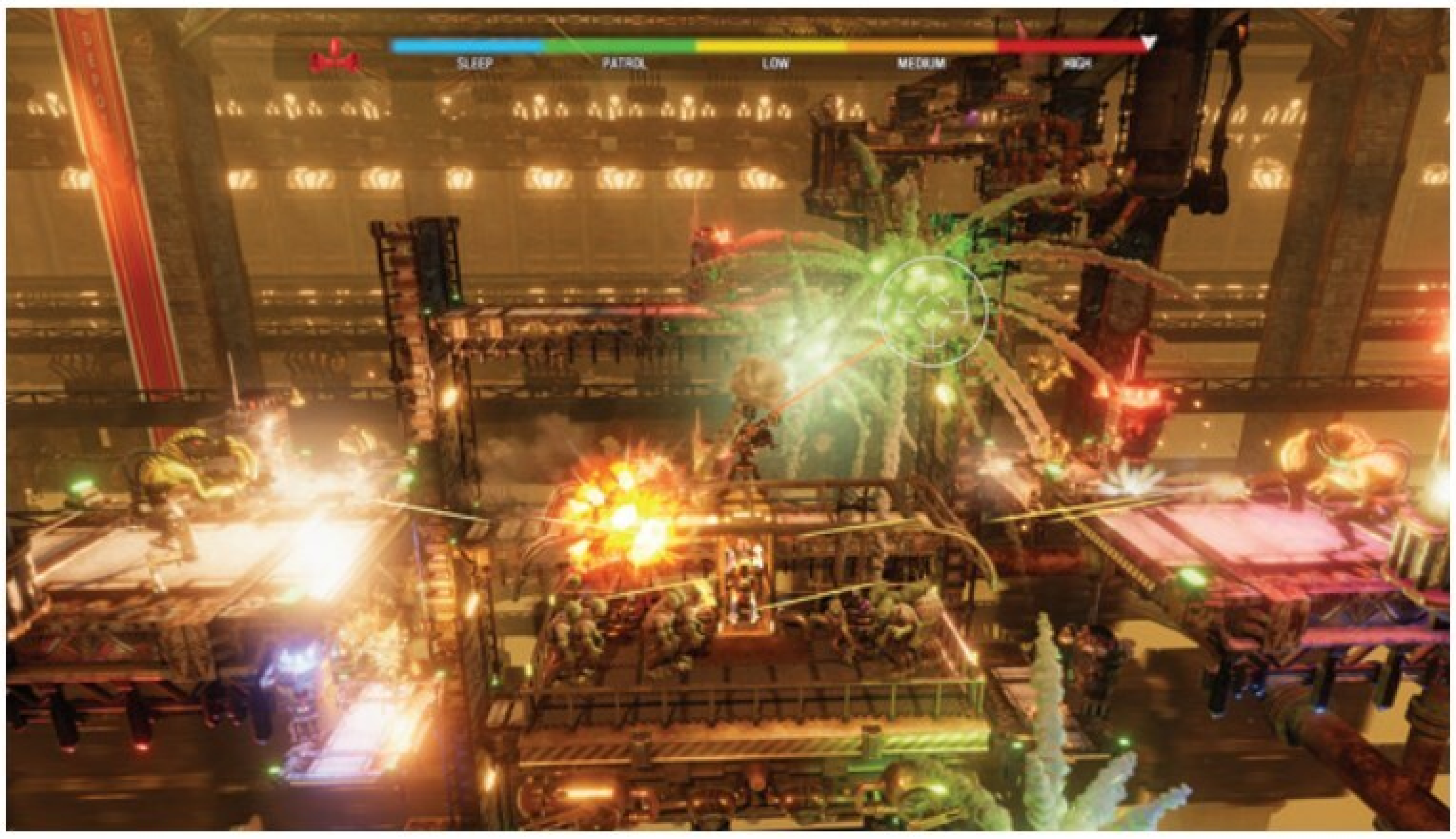


Oddworld: Soulstorm

Down with the man

When the Oddworld series first came into the world in 1997 with Abe's Oddysee, it challenged a lot of genre expectations. In an age when platformers were mostly mascot-driven tests of skill, Abe's Oddysee flipped the script with a simultaneously nebbish and ghoulish main character and action that focused on difficult puzzles and a dangerous world. Over the years, as the various Oddworld licenses have expired, director Lorne Lanning has finally gotten his chance to revisit Abe once again with a brand new game that expands on what made the original so unique in the first place.

Oddworld: Soulstorm is somewhat of a soft reboot for the series. While inspired by Abe's Exoddus, Soulstorm takes place where Exoddus once stood. It is not a remake, but a reimagining of the game's quintology coming after Oddworld: New 'n' Tasty, the remake of Abe's Oddysee released in 2014. The games still retain Oddworld's pro-environmentalism and anti-corporatism spirit at their heart, tasking Abe with rescuing fellow Mudokons from slave labor and leading them into what is often a violent uprising to freedom.



Soulstorm picks up right where New 'n' Tasty left off in both story and gameplay. While the previous game was a near-identical remake of Abe's Oddysee, Soulstorm expounds on those mechanics by taking pieces from the interstitial games released 20 years ago and giving them a modern spin. The basic idea of shepherding Mudokons to an end goal is still the focus, but now Abe must take groups through the entire level past all manner of dangers. It is a mob mentality, and only Abe can help get them to the end goal.

By convincing workers to join the revolution and escape their corporate overlords, Abe ends up doing the only thing that would cause the pit bosses to notice something is wrong by causing an observable drop in worker efficiency. Setting off all these alarms puts Abe and his flock in danger, so he has to arm himself with various gum balls and grenades to knock guards out. Abe or his followers can also go a bit further with the fates of guards, like setting them on fire, but an invisible karma system watches in the background to some still undefined end.

The heart of Oddworld still beats in Soulstorm decades after the original game released. The puzzle-platformer hopes to be a second chance for the developers to make good on the promise of the original series by making the games in the way they have always wanted to make them, and it now has every opportunity to make that happen.

» **Imran Khan**

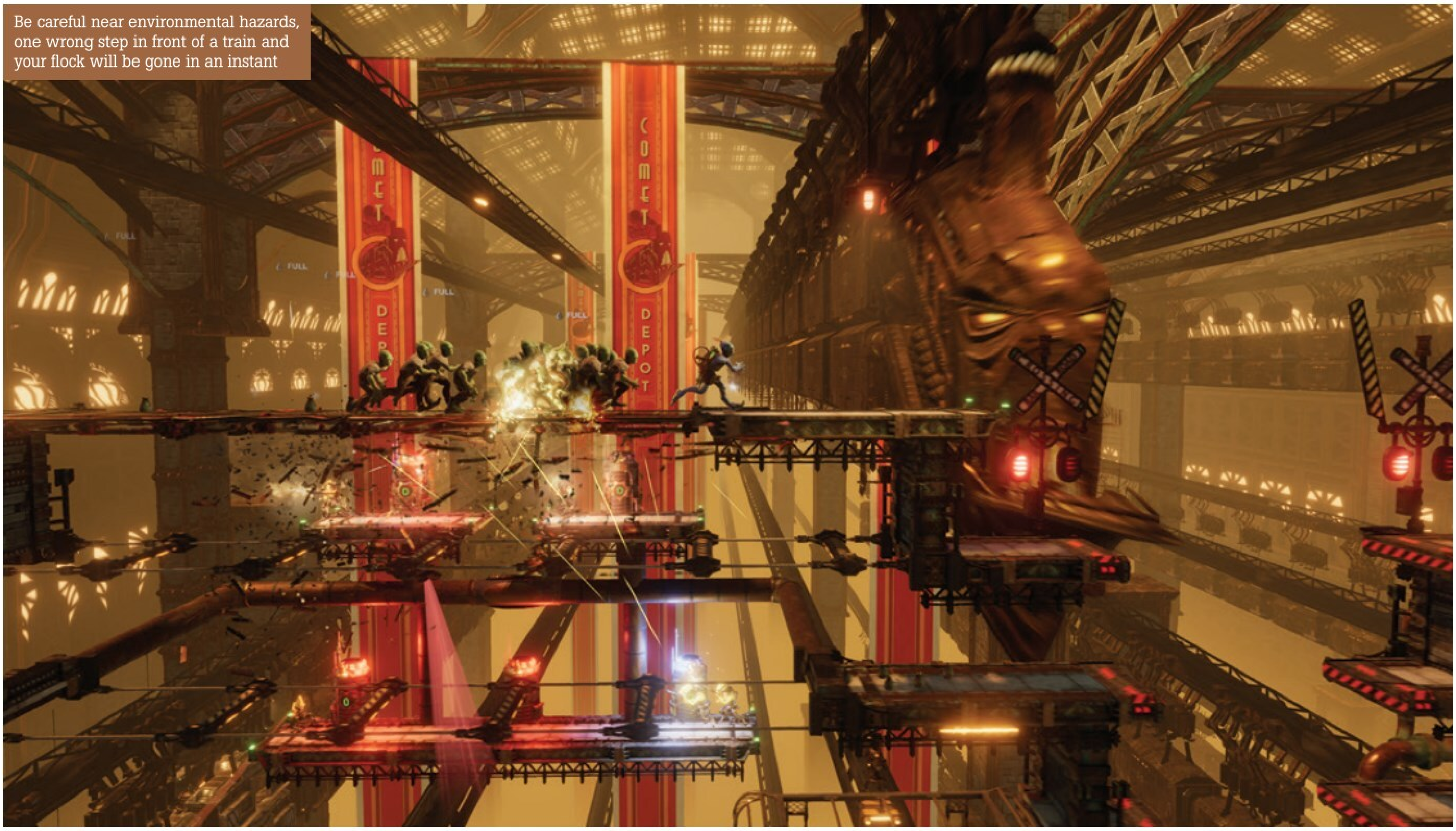
» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Platforming

» **Publisher**
Oddworld Inhabitants

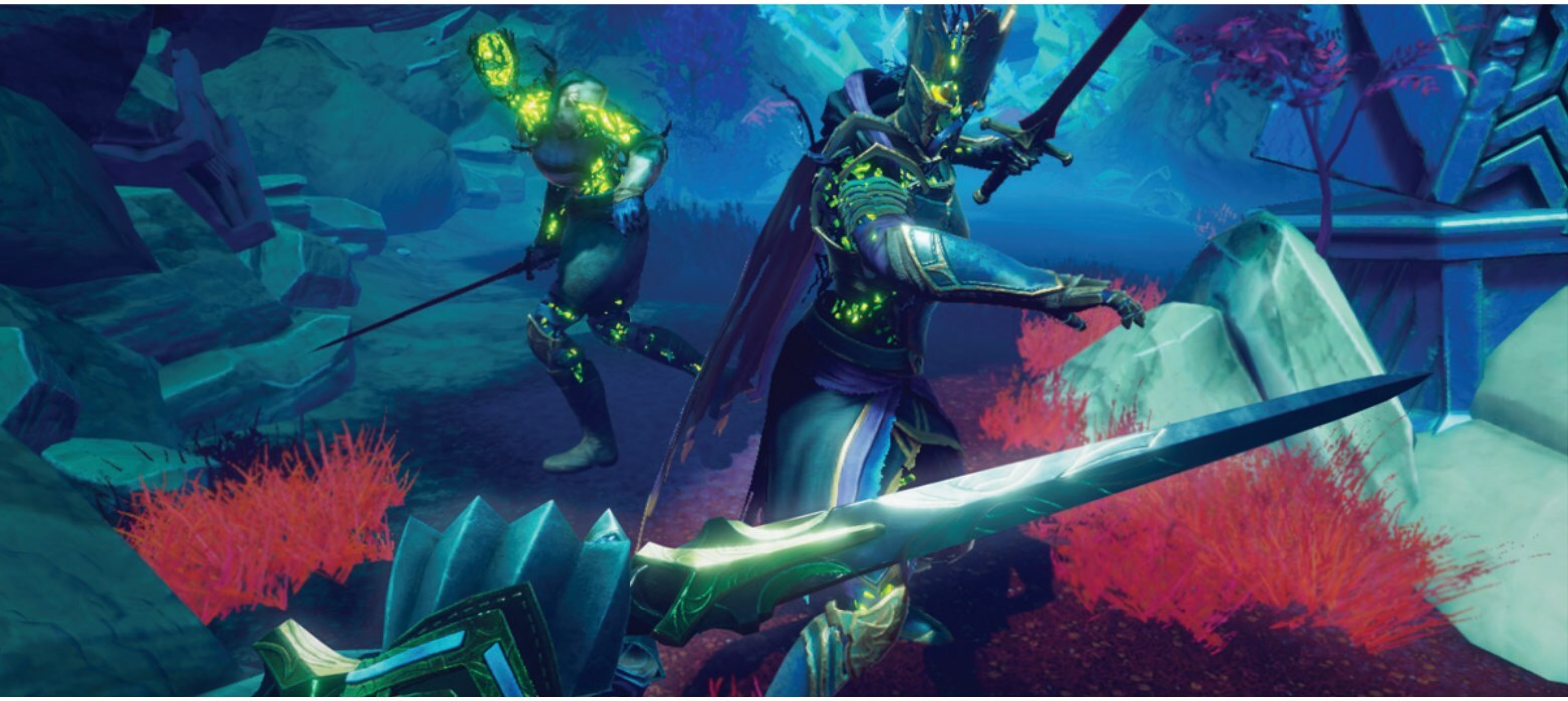
» **Developer**
Oddworld Inhabitants

» **Release**
2020


Be careful near environmental hazards, one wrong step in front of a train and your flock will be gone in an instant

Until You Fall

Schell Games brings the deadly clash of steel to VR



» Platform
Rift • Vive

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Schell Games

» Developer
Schell Games

» Release
2019

Schell Games' first VR game, I Expect You to Die, let players inhabit a suave (and imperiled) James Bond-like hero who had to solve puzzles to extricate himself from a variety of dire situations. The indie studio's follow-up pits players against more immediate threats. Ticking time bombs and out-of-control escape pods were certainly deadly, but Until You Fall proves you can't reason with a broadsword – especially when it's slashing toward your skull.

"The potential for melee combat in VR is huge," says Jesse Schell, the studio's CEO. "I worked on a thing called Ride the Comix for DisneyQuest maybe 25 years ago, which was the first time I'd used a sword in VR, and it was like, 'Oh my god, this is the future!' We also worked on the Jedi Challenges augmented-reality experience, so we had some experience doing melee combat in augmented reality, and we kept thinking, 'Boy, if we took melee into VR and really did it right, we feel like there could be something strong there.'"

He's not wrong. After donning a headset, I'm transported into the armor of a nameless knight. A helpful guide tries her best to get me acclimated to this strange and colorful new world, but something goes wrong. Before I know it, I'm attacked by an imposing armored figure who doesn't seem like he's here to make friends. At first, it doesn't feel like a fair fight; I'm unarmed, and don't know how I'm going to survive. Once I pull the triggers on the Oculus controllers, however, a spectral sword and dagger materialize in my hands. It's on.

Attacking is as simple as swinging my arms, and while there's obviously no weight behind the movements, it's still a convincing illusion. Waggling wildly doesn't work, and the enemy capitalizes on my unchecked aggression with their own punishing blows. Soon I learn to wait for openings before swinging, and also get better at blocking – a maneuver that requires quick reaction to on-screen prompts guiding me to where I need to angle my blade. Each instanced area is filled with more enemies, and I learn to start encounters by dashing toward them and slamming them with a powerful, stunning strike. I choose to move throughout the zones freely, but teleportation is an option for those who struggle with VR wooziness. Even though I live up to the title and fall time and time again, the experience manages to make me feel as close to a knight as is probably possible.

"We tried to get everything in the game to make you feel like you were taking on heroic postures, heroic moves – the whole business where you have to match your sword to the premonition marks, it tricks you into stiffening your muscles in a way that creates an artificial tactile experience," Schell says.

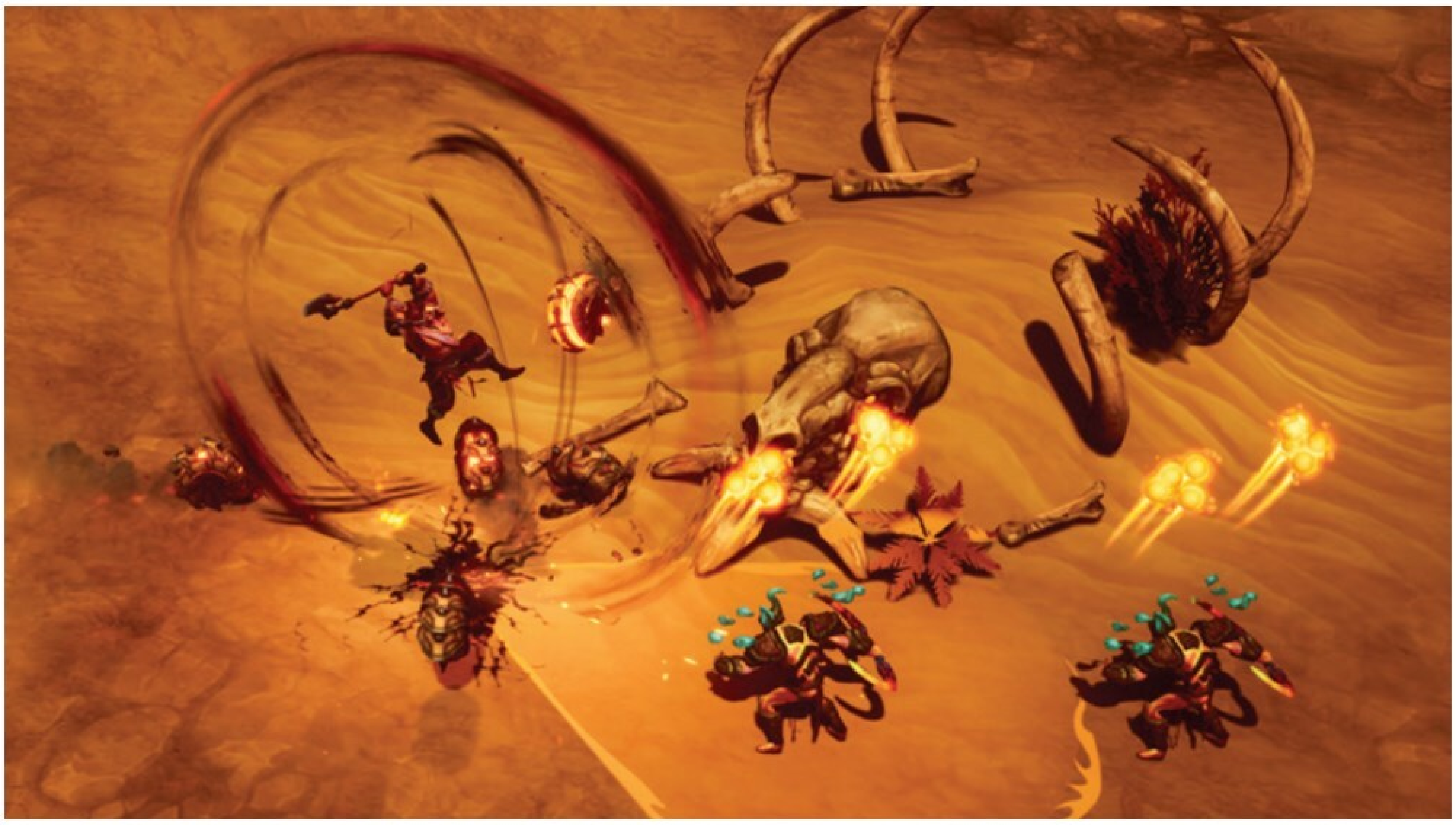
Between these encounters, I was able to get upgrades and an in-game currency to buy new weapons. I picked an axe and was pleasantly surprised to see that it "felt" differently than the sword. Instead of quickly slashing enemies to ribbons, it took longer to swing – but rewarded patience and accuracy with devastating damage output.

"The big thing for us, too, was to make sure you had that sense of presence in VR, and making sure that the swords feel like swords," says project lead David Bennett. "A lot of love and time has been put into making sure that the weapons have a sense of weight. It's not complete one-to-one mapping, because sure, that's responsive, but it makes the swords feel weightless and not real."

The demo I played was still early in development, and Schell Games says more weapons and environments will be added to the finished game. Even with that caveat, Until You Fall is another great showcase for VR's potential. Talking with Schell, it's hard not to come away feeling like something of an evangelist for the technology, even if I haven't been working on it for decades. "Back then, it was like, 'This is clearly the future, it's just a question of when,'" he says. "In terms of the business of going into a fantasy experience and just having a meaningful interactive experience you care about, VR is the pinnacle of technology. As we watch this market grow and expand and people start investing more, it's going to be clear that the deepest, richest game experiences are going to be in VR." » **Jeff Cork**

Pagan Online

Wargaming tackles fantasy



Players are always hungry for new offerings in the hack-and-slash genre. The upstart Pagan Online eschews many modern conventions of the free-to-play game-as-service model for a different approach that encourages experimentation.

Pagan Online starts players off with a single class, but unlocks many more as players progress. Once unlocked, these new classes start at a power level similar to your "main," as item restrictions take place at the account level and not the character level. This should encourage players to try a multitude of classes as they cast, bash, and loot. Characters run the gamut from traditional archetypes like a tank or mage to interesting offshoots like the melee caster, a fortune teller who wields tambourines and flings tarot cards.

Crafting is a core component of Pagan Online. You level up your crafting skill by making new items, giving you a natural progression toward creating ridiculously powerful items. Unlike other hack-and-slash games, you are often seeking out the "plain" items without any magical properties, as these are the basis for creating powerful crafted gear. In fact, forging the game's legendary gear often requires you to seek out standard items to use as components alongside rare materials.

Characters have a defined set of moves that make the control scheme feel somewhat like a MOBA, with a smattering of standard abilities, an evasion or mobility skill, and an ultimate that charges up through combat. Pagan Online does not use point-and-click for movement, so players familiar with WASD schemes should have an easier time adapting to this design choice.

A traditional campaign serves up a story based on Slavic mythology and some big act bosses, but much of your time is spent on missions and assassinations. Missions allow you to pick a task like defense or survival and select a difficulty level, then roll in for a shot at big loot and keys. Keys can then be used to unlock assassination tasks, which give you a massive influx of character shards, the currency used to unlock new classes and cosmetic outfits. You can team up with another player to take on tougher challenges and to combine class moves for bigger benefits in co-op play, something expected to be expanded upon before release.

Pagan Online has some cool concepts in play, and I'm looking forward to seeing how essential aspects like endgame progression and longevity are handled when the game gets a full release. Pagan Online is currently available in Early Access on Steam. » **Daniel Tack**

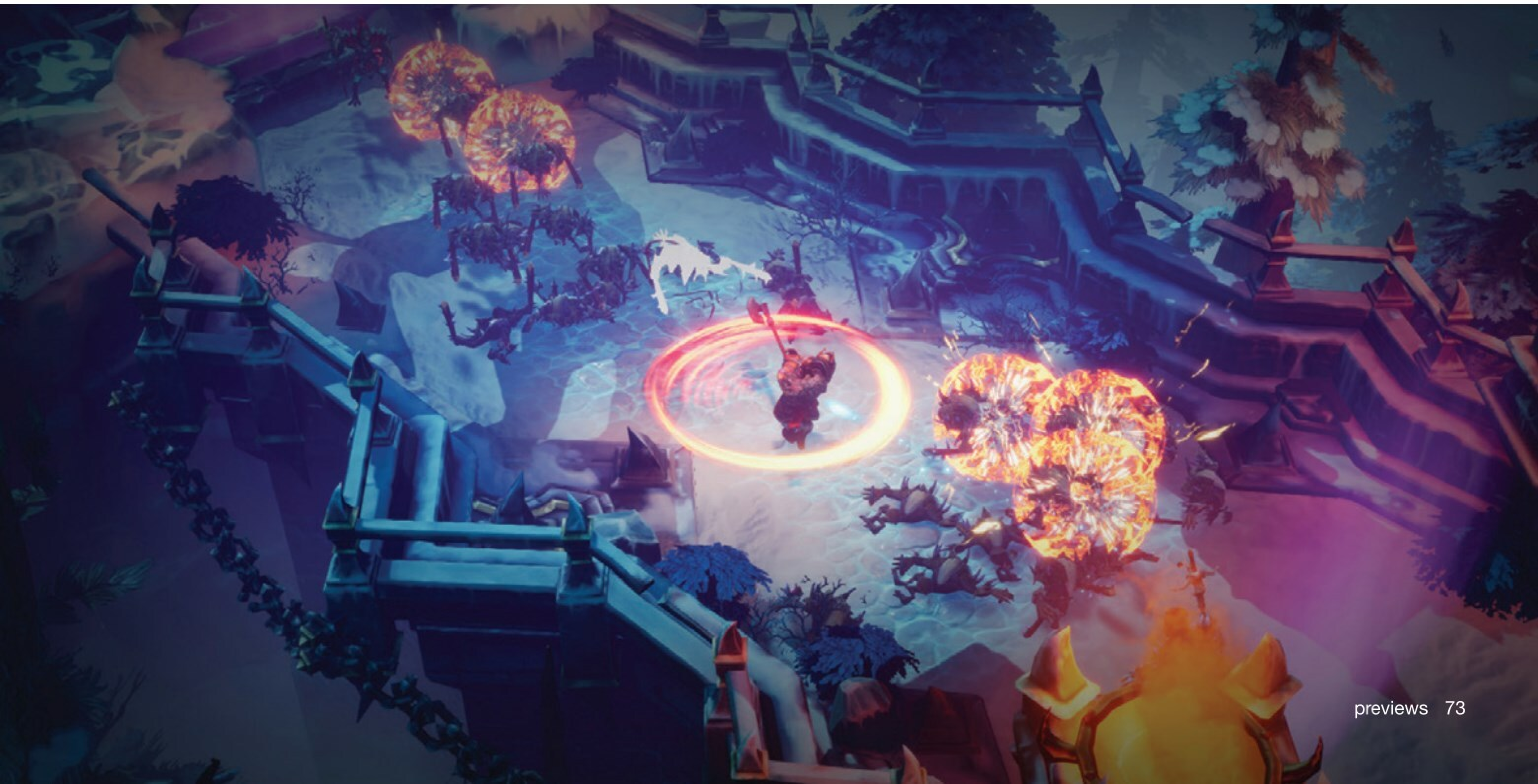
» Platform
PC

» Style
1 or 2-Player
Action/Role-Playing
(2-Player Online)

» Publisher
Wargaming

» Developer
Mad Head Games

» Release
TBA



Streets Of Rage 4

Hitting the streets … again

» Platform
TBA

» Style
1 or 2-Player Action
(Online TBA)

» Publisher
DotEmu

» Developer
Lizardcube,
Guard Crush Games

» Release
2019

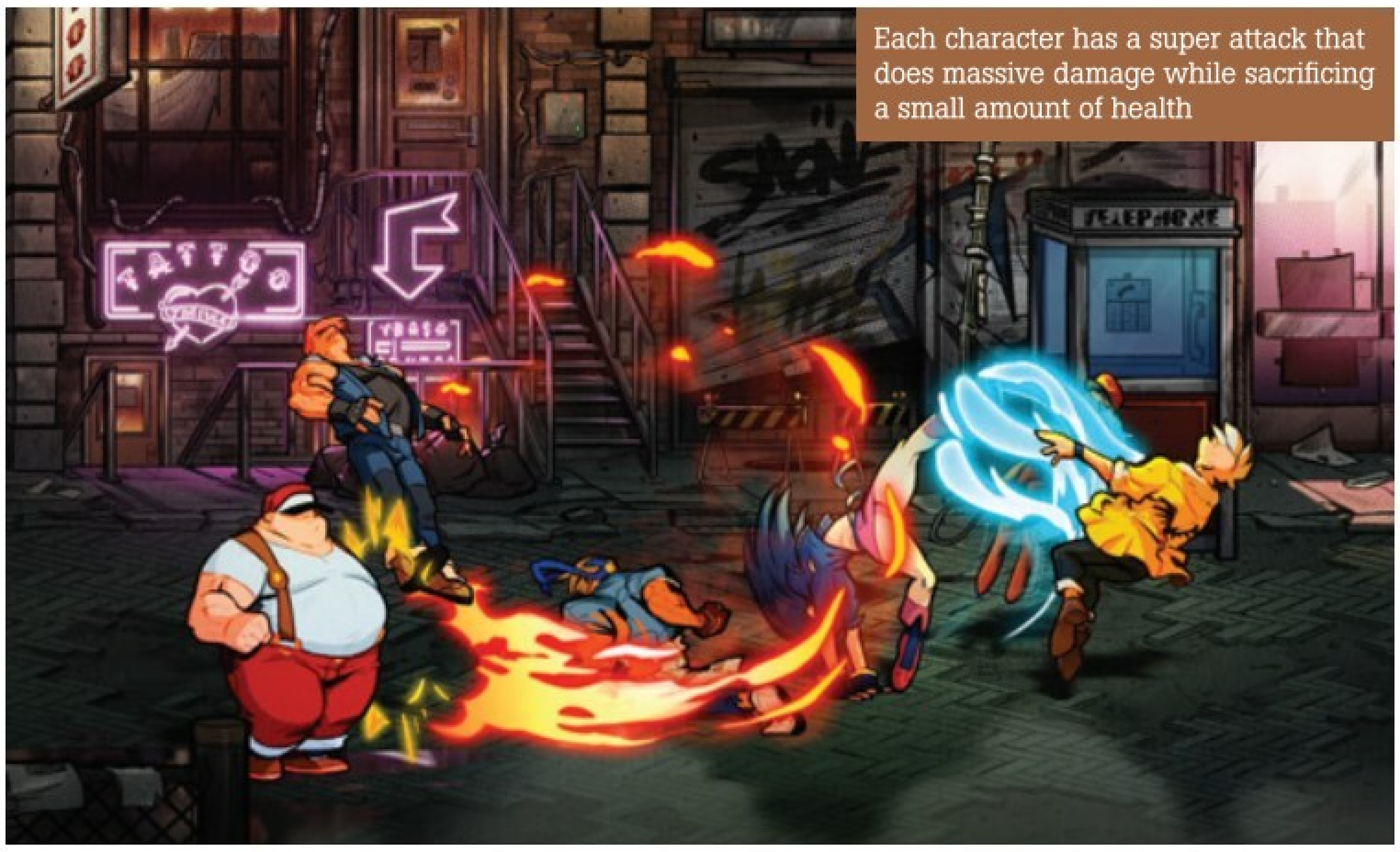
The original Streets of Rage trilogy released on the Sega Genesis during the '90s heyday of side-scrolling beat 'em ups. At the time, the series was renowned for its flashy visuals and pulsing electronic soundtracks. After a 25-year hiatus, DotEmu acquired the license from Sega and is working on a long-awaited sequel.

Side-scrolling beat 'em ups were never heavy on story: the original Streets of Rage games centered on a group of ex-police officers who waded through gang-infested streets to impose order on a chaotic city. Streets of Rage 4 hews closely to that lineage. Set 10 years after the original trilogy, players control returning martial arts masters like Axel Stone and Blaze Fielding – as well as a couple of unannounced newcomers – as they punch and kick their way through syndicate-controlled city-blocks. These streets are still dirty, but they look better than ever thanks to modern animation techniques.

"Our goal was that players never get bored," says artist Julian Nguyen-You. "We wanted to tell a story through the scenery, adding a lot of details and events that players can appreciate and discover throughout their many runs. A lot of work has been done to bring different atmospheres, and all the backgrounds are different and contribute to giving varied feelings to the adventure."

Lizardcube and Guard Crush Games' work remains incredibly faithful to the original beat 'em up formula. The action is fast and frantic, and hits have a nice impact. As with the original games, each character has a super attack that does massive damage while sacrificing a small amount of your character's health. However, in Street of Rage 4, players now have the opportunity to restore some of that lost health by dishing out regular attacks after their super. A few other small updates include a dedicated weapon pickup button, character-specific air specials, juggle combos, and the ability to catch weapons in the air. The team isn't ready to announce the platforms for Street of Rage 4, but our demo ran off a PC and we used an Xbox One controller, if that's a hint. Overall, Street of Rage 4 feels like a classic game in a modern skin, but DotEmu hopes these small improvements are enough to help revitalize the aging genre.

"I think side-scrolling beat 'em ups would be more popular today if they came farther from their arcade roots," says programmer and designer Cyrille Lagarigue. "Most beat 'em ups were made for the arcade, so they were too frantic and punishing. I think that's why the beat 'em ups that still hold up today have been made for console first, like the Streets of Rages or Guardian Heroes. One of our goals is to make Streets of Rage 4 challenging but not punishing, with a more strategic and deliberate gameplay."
» Ben Reeves



Each character has a super attack that does massive damage while sacrificing a small amount of health

Children Of Morta

Family sticks together

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
11-Bit Studios

» Developer
Dead Mage

» Release
Summer

Children of Morta brings an intriguing twist to the roguelite formula by making dungeon-crawling a family affair. Instead of a party of traditional fantasy heroes, you fight your way through enemy encounters with the help of your siblings, parental figures, and relatives.

As an isometric roguelite, dungeon crawling in Children of Morta consists of slashing through enemies, gaining new abilities, and acquiring loot such as coins for upgrades.

"Family is the backbone of the experience," says 11-Bit marketing director Patryk Grzeszczuk. "We're working on making the story meaningful and to let you as a player not only understand those characters and their motivations, but also to get attached to them and invest in them."

As a story-driven title, party members aren't just fighters, but also active participants in the story. Children of Morta is about the Bergson family who attempts to fend off an overwhelming corruption. The only way to end the growing devastation is by making your way to the source: Mount Morta.

"It's a game about love, friendship, and supporting each other," Grzeszczuk says. "But also anger that comes from grief and loss."

To get there, you must activate and enter portals to rescue the gods in three different biomes. These areas each have their own aesthetic (caverns, middle-eastern inspired lands, and a steampunk world) and unique enemy types. For example, in the caverns, I encountered spiders who spewed webs that temporarily slowed me down to a sluggish pace when I was hit, and undead soldiers armed with swords.

During the demo, I had a chance to try out two characters: John and Linda.

John, the father of the family, is a tank who wields a shield and sword, and Linda is an archer. When a swarm of enemies appears, John is best at cutting down the crowd at close range. Linda, on the other hand, excels at a distance since she is quicker and more fragile than John. I particularly enjoyed playing as Linda, who you control with twin sticks – one for navigating and the other for aiming and shooting. She's swift and fun to control. John is brutal in combat, but is more sluggish. I sometimes missed hitting enemies due to imprecise controls.

Children of Morta is challenging; you respawn at the family home if you die, forcing you to restart the dungeon. Failure, however, isn't necessarily a bad thing. Following one of my deaths, I could spend my accumulated funds I found as loot to buy new gear in the Bergson family home by visiting the uncle's workshop. Now, returning to the dungeon would prove easier. 11-Bit says that even after completing dungeons, you will have to return to them. Each run is slightly different thanks to procedural generation and randomized story beats for side quests. It's up to you whether you want to help NPCs in dungeons, such as a small pup trying to protect its dying mother by warding off werewolves.

Between runs you return to the family home and can switch characters for your next adventure. It's best to choose your playable heroes wisely, since some dungeons are easier with certain characters over others thanks to diverse skillsets. Outside of upgrading gear, you can tweak the family's stats, level up, obtain potions from the alchemist grandmother, and acquire other supplies as you upgrade the house.

"We didn't want to have a menu to do all that; we wanted a living, breathing home," Grzeszczuk says.

Story moments will happen there as you progress. You can also see family members passing time in different ways, like one smoking a pipe on the stairs and the youngest drawing on scattered papers, which gives insight into their personalities.

With its beautifully crafted pixelated world and twist to the roguelite genre, I'm eager to see how Children of Morta fares when it releases later this year.
» **Elise Favis**

Satisfactory

A strong foundation

» Platform
PC

» Style
1-Player Action
(4-Player Online)

» Publisher
Coffee Stain Studios

» Developer
Coffee Stain Studios

» Release
March 19
(Early Access)

Gathering resources and crafting materials is tough work, which is why Satisfactory, the new first-person game from Goat Simulator developer Coffee Stain Studios, strongly encourages you to automate these processes. However, that doesn't mean you can just kick back and put your feet up, as increasingly demanding production and crafting goals require you to maintain a constantly growing, efficiently run factory.

As the newest employee of FICSIT, you're dropped onto one of three uncolonized planets with the mission of gathering resources. However, before you can make any real progress, you need to build a hub on a nice, flat surface.

Don't expect much from your hub at first; its initial form only has a crafting bench, a storage locker, and a command center. Each milestone in your command center gives you building goals that help you reach the resource requirements to gain your next upgrade.

At first, finding resources comes down to how good of an explorer you are. You can send out a ping to find specific resources like iron, copper, and limestone, but they're sometimes up on clifftops and surrounded by hostile creatures; just because this planet is unsettled doesn't mean it's devoid of life. You're not completely defenseless – you have a stun gun to fend off alien life – but you're far from formidable in confrontations. If you die, you respawn back at your hub, but everything you had on you is left where you died.

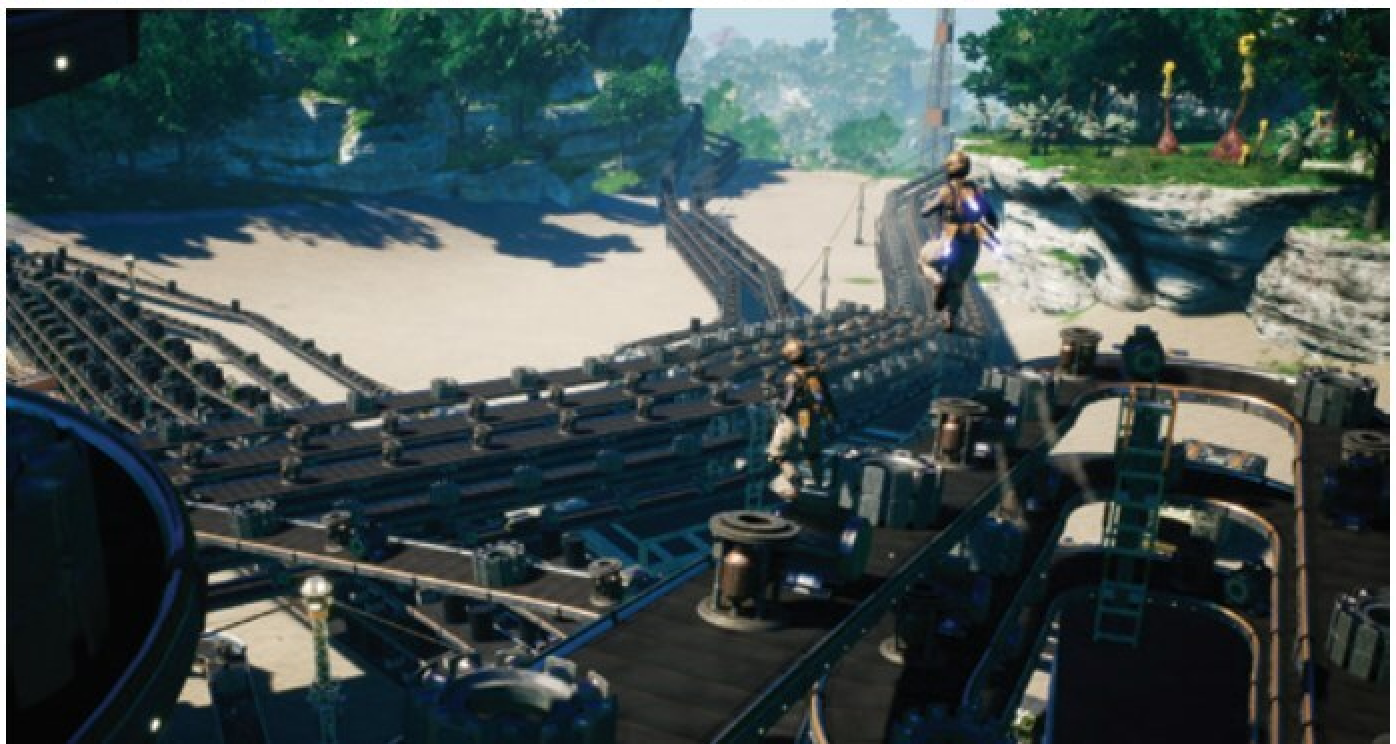
As you continue to upgrade your hub, you unlock new blueprints. Initially, you just have a smelter, which automatically converts raw metals into ingots, and an equipment workshop, which lets you build mobile mining robots. However, you quickly gain access to mining facilities and a constructor that converts ingots into more usable materials like rods, cables, and screws. Most importantly, you can build conveyor belts to connect all these facilities in order to automate the process.

By the end of my second hour with Satisfactory, I had an efficient system in which a mining facility fed iron ore from a nearby deposit directly into a smelter, which then fed its ingots into the constructor to mass produce the iron plates I needed for my next upgrade. This meant I could go manually mine copper and limestone while my factory worked on the iron products. Despite my success, I still had a long way to go. My next mission now that my hub was a well-oiled machine? Build a space elevator so I can transport resources to FICSIT.

Satisfactory is currently in Early Access, which means it still has some rough edges. Most notably, my character often stopped dead in their tracks, getting caught up in the environment while running; I could resume movement by simply pressing forward on the keyboard again, but it's an annoyance.

Satisfactory's Early Access is currently taking place exclusively on the Epic Games Store. We don't know when it will exit Early Access to reach its 1.0 state, but Coffee Stain Studios claims it won't be for at least a year. Satisfactory already has a compelling gameplay loop that rewards players for intelligent layouts and intentional exploration, and I'm interested to see how the experience improves from here.

» Brian Shea



Read Only Memories: Neurodiver

A sequel about finding identity

Quality point-and-click adventures are few and far between these days. MidBoss' 2064: Read Only Memories quickly became the one to play when it launched back in 2015. The game had stylish visuals, a great soundtrack, a cool cyberpunk backdrop, and most importantly, intriguing characters you wanted to get to know. The game continued to reach a wider audience with subsequent console releases. Now MidBoss is back to top its previous efforts with a sequel called Neurodiver.

Neurodiver takes place in the vibrant world of Neo-San Francisco just like its predecessor, meaning you're bound to run into a few memorable faces, from gene-spliced lawyer Jess Meas to former-police-officer-turned-private-eye Lexi Rivers. The familiar backdrop doesn't mean there aren't any surprises and new additions, though. Neurodiver introduces new characters, locations, and mechanics. The game centers around its newest gameplay addition and namesake, a genetically engineered device allowing you to dive into people's memories.

True to its cyberpunk setting, you play as ES88, a telepath employed by a powerful organization specializing in neurotechnology and extrasensory-projection phenomena. To gain the power to dive into people's memories and secure employment at the agency, ES88 gave up her identity, meaning she has no recollection of her prior life. ES88's Neurodiver is a powerful tool that sports a deep dive mechanic, which allows her to identify and absorb information. However, it comes with a catch. If you overuse it, you can irreparably corrupt a person's memory. Talk about pressure. But things get even more complicated for ES88 when a rogue psychic named Esper starts wreaking havoc through the subconscious minds of Neo-San Francisco. Your job? Use the Neurodiver to dive into memories and track down the mysterious figure.

With the focus on diving into people's minds, the narrative explores themes of memory, perception, and identity through the intriguing lens of someone who willingly gave up everything she was. Neurodiver already looks to have the hallmarks that made the first game resonate: diverse characters and an intriguing mystery.

Right now, Neurodiver is set to come to PC and Mac, but with the previous entry making its way to home consoles, we wouldn't be surprised if it eventually follows suit. The first game struck an emotional chord with many, but had some technical shortcomings. Hopefully, Midboss sticks with the former and improves on the latter for the sequel. » **Kimberley Wallace**

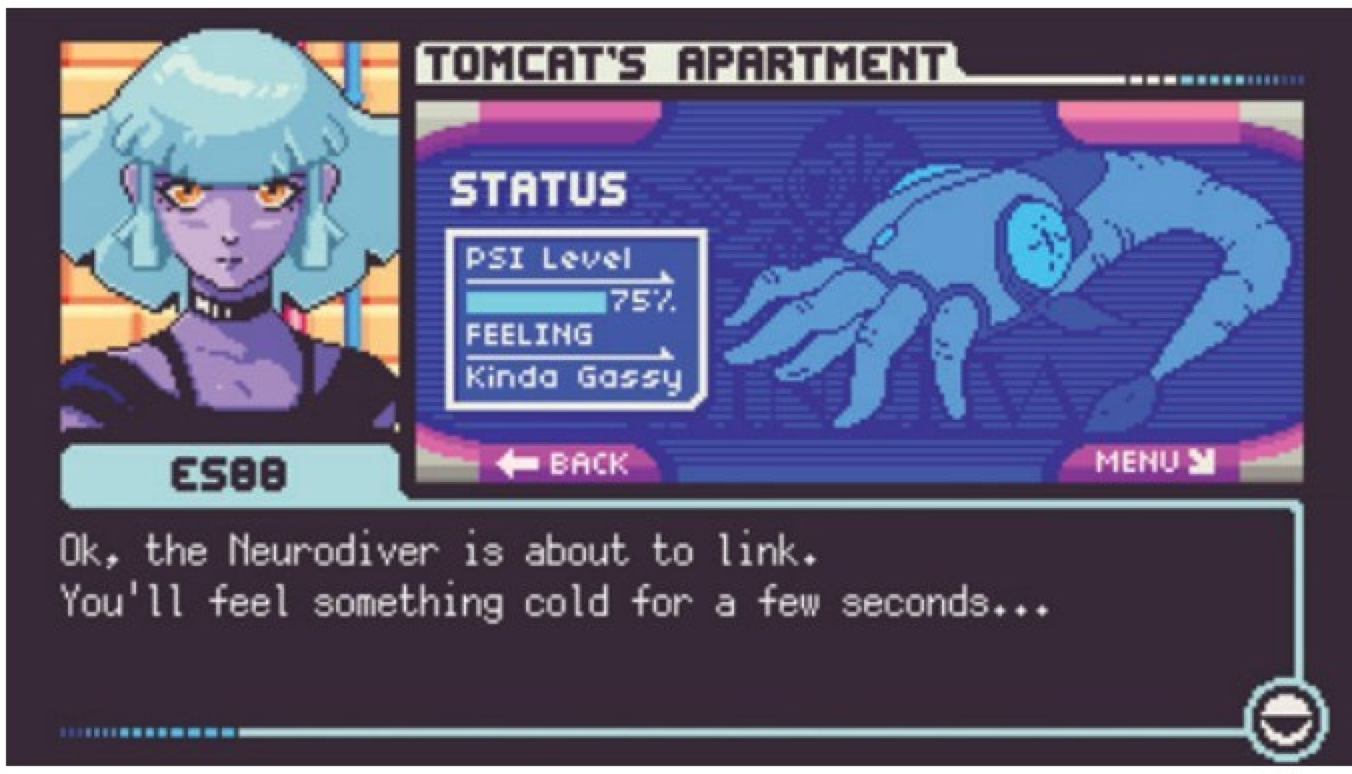
» Platform
PC • Mac

» Style
1-Player Adventure

» Publisher
MidBoss

» Developer
MidBoss

» Release
2020



Ok, the Neurodiver is about to link.
You'll feel something cold for a few seconds...

F1 2019

New levels of competition

F1 2018 took the franchise's career mode in exciting new directions via management options that entwined nicely with your on-the-track performance. F1 2019 adds the Formula 2 feeder series, but it's only for a three-race introduction to the normal F1 career path. Regardless, developer Codemasters is also making adjustments to the career mode's progression and moving the franchise's multiplayer mode forward through customization and more ways to play.

Even though Formula 2's inclusion in career mode is only for a drama-filled three-scenario jaunt where you meet two fictional characters who follow you into F1, one friend and one rival, fans can play the 2018 Formula 2 season on the disc – the 2019 schedule is a free download after launch. Whether in a single season or in the career mode prelude, F2's rules and car handling make it a different experience. F2 cars are heavier with more narrow tires, so braking distances increase and you'll have to watch your acceleration to avoid spinning out.

The career mode itself is being tweaked for 2019, with teams more willing to dump you if you don't fulfill your contractual obligations, and the lauded R&D research trees rebalanced to specifically suit each F1 team.

A well-run organization is also a theme of F1 2019's multiplayer rework. Public and private user-created leagues have been added, including member voting; roles (such as owner, administrator, member); and spec car visual-only customization through liveries, team badges, driver suits, and more – including some items available for real money.

It's initially disappointing the F2 experience isn't a bigger part of F1 2019's career mode, but series director Lee Mathers says Codemasters wants players to get to the main event of F1 and not have F2 overstay its welcome. This makes sense, and since the series has previously done a great job of nestling its career mode components together effectively, I'm excited to see how F1 2019 puts it all together to make another push for the podium. » **Matthew Kato**

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Racing
(22-Player Online)

» Publisher
Codemasters

» Developer
Codemasters
Birmingham

» Release
June 28

Super Mario Maker 2

Mario fans get more creation tools

» **Platform**
Switch

» **Style**
1 to 4-Player
Platforming
(4-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Nintendo

» **Developer**
Nintendo

» **Release**
June 28

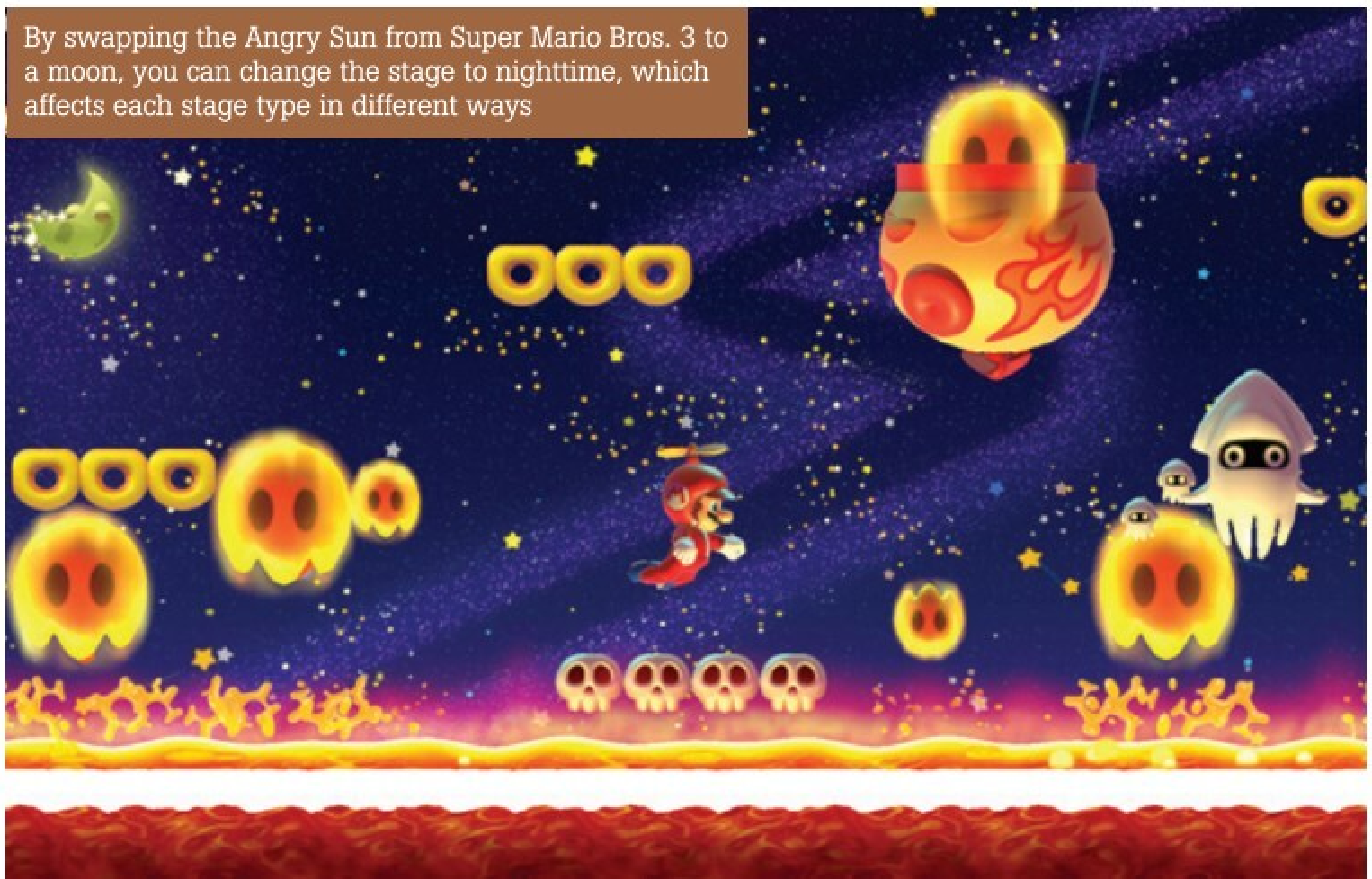
When Super Mario Maker launched on Wii U in 2015, it was a dream come true for longtime fans of Nintendo's flagship franchise. Not only could you easily transpose levels from your imagination into an actual Mario game, but you could also play through an endless stream of stages from creators across the globe. Super Mario Maker 2 brings this same concept to Switch with a host of improvements.

The biggest addition is a new Mario game to create levels within. Super Mario 3D World joins Super Mario Maker 2, but in a twist it only allows you to craft stages on a 2D plane. Because 3D World uses so many unique elements, including the cat suit power-up, clear pipes, floating crates, warp boxes, spike blocks, and blinking blocks, it cannot be used to create in conjunction with the other styles. If you swap between it and any other game style, your progress on that stage is wiped.

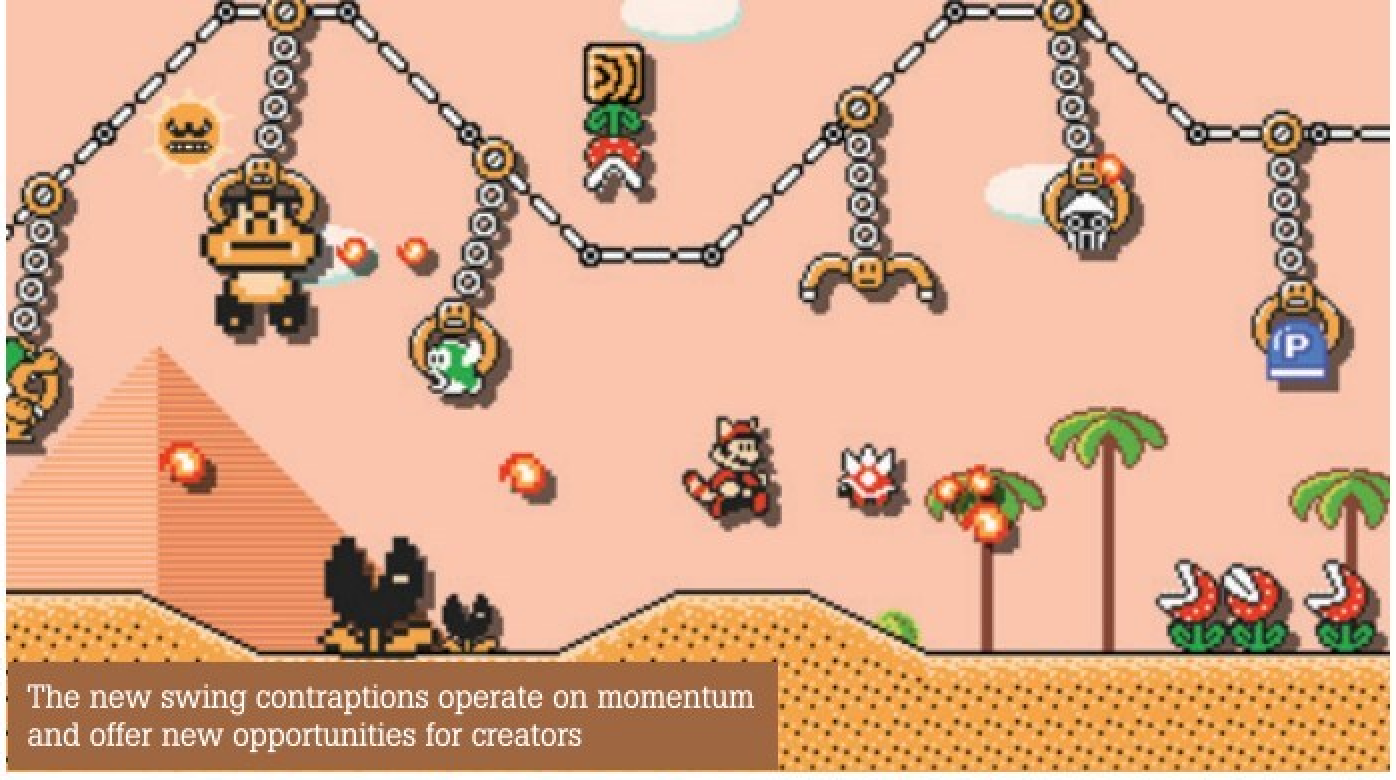
The new game style may be the most striking new addition, but players can also use several new elements to create levels within Super Mario Bros., Super Mario Bros. 3, Super Mario World, and New Super Mario Bros. U. The best part is you don't have to go through the slow unlocking process from the first Super Mario Maker; most parts are available from the start. Many oft-requested features are included, such as the ability to add sloped surfaces and customized auto-scroll cameras.

Nintendo didn't just add new creation elements for 3D World; other additions include a moving snake block, the dreaded Angry Sun from Super Mario Bros. 3, and on/off switches that can control different stage pieces. Players can also add momentum-based swing contraptions, a new Dry Bones' shell power-up that lets you surf on water and turn invincible for a few seconds, and more valuable coins to reward adventurous players.

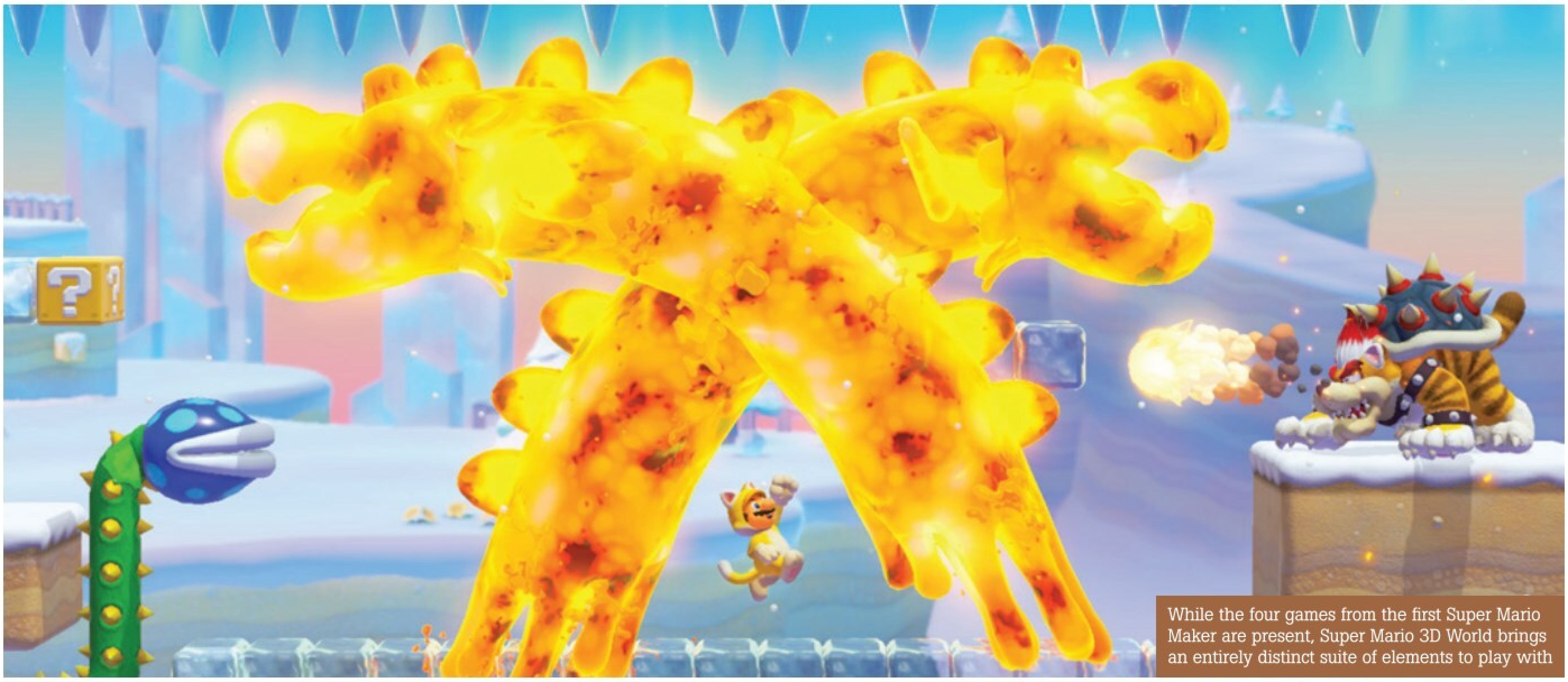
In addition, you can experiment with new environments like desert, snow, forest, and sky. Each one of these themes has new music from legendary Nintendo composer Koji Kondo. You can also shift each theme to nighttime, which affects the music, as well as various parts of the stages. For instance, underground stages turn upside down, while levels set in the sky feature reduced gravity. You can even add new clear conditions, like grabbing a set amount of coins, not touching the ground once you initially leave it, reaching the goal without taking damage, or defeating a certain number of a particular enemy type.



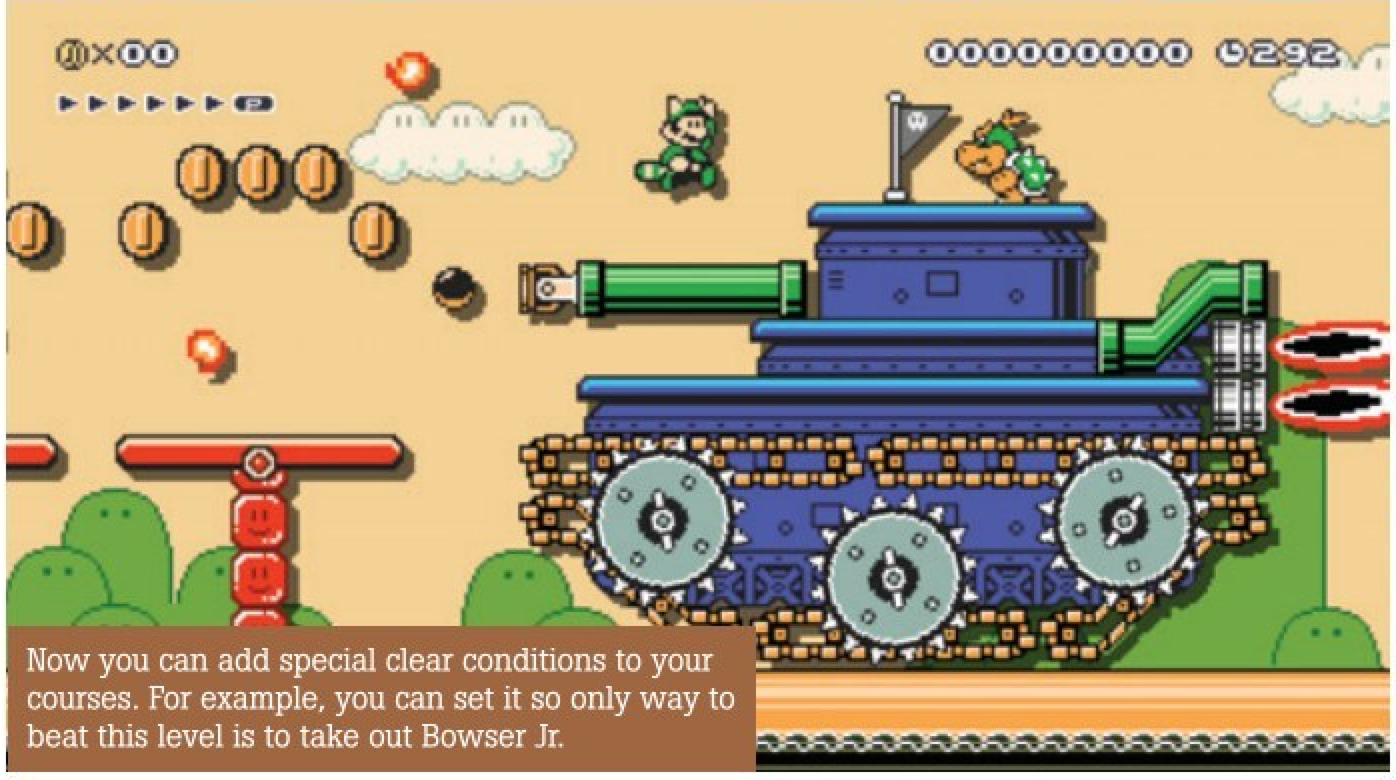
By swapping the Angry Sun from Super Mario Bros. 3 to a moon, you can change the stage to nighttime, which affects each stage type in different ways



The new swing contraptions operate on momentum and offer new opportunities for creators



While the four games from the first Super Mario Maker are present, Super Mario 3D World brings an entirely distinct suite of elements to play with



Now you can add special clear conditions to your courses. For example, you can set it so only way to beat this level is to take out Bowser Jr.

Despite the myriad new additions, once in the creation toolset, the premise is the same: Use the various stage pieces ranging from mushrooms and bricks to Bowser and Goombas, to make a level as tame or wild as you want. If you want to recreate World 1-1 of Super Mario Bros. in the Super Mario World style, you can do that. At the same time, nothing is stopping you from stacking five Koopa Troopas on top of Bowser on a fast-moving conveyor belt while a Lakitu rains spiny death from above. Absurd stages such as that helped Super Mario Maker become one of the ultimate proving grounds for longtime platforming players.

In my hands-on time with Super Mario Maker 2, I noticed subtle changes that improve the creation experience. Since you can't use the touchscreen to create when the Switch is in docked mode, the menus in the course creator have been retooled. Multiple radial menus help you find the tool you want to use with ease, while the hotbar at the top of the screen allows you to pin certain objects, or simply display your most recently used components.

Super Mario Maker 2 is meant to be a social experience. While the first game forwarded this idea through the sharing of levels, the sequel fully embraces multiplayer. Two friends can create simultaneously on the same screen using single Joy-Cons, while up to four players can play through levels either locally or online. Whether you're racing to the end of a stage in hopes of coming out on top or you're all working together to clear a level, new online multiplayer modes add additional angles for creators to approach the toolset.

Soloists can download from the pool of created levels, or jump into a new story mode that tasks you with rebuilding Peach's castle after it gets destroyed. To do so, you must complete more than 100 stages created by Nintendo using the Super Mario Maker 2 toolset, collecting coins needed to fund the reconstruction efforts.

Super Mario Maker 2 looks even more promising than its predecessor as both a creation toolset and an ultimate challenge for longtime franchise fans. With so much added to the already beloved foundation of the series, Super Mario Maker 2 should be an exciting addition to the Switch's catalog when it launches this month.

» **Brian Shea**

reviews

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

88 Dreams

It was a long time in the making, but Media Molecule's vision of bringing easy and intuitive game development to the masses has finally come to fruition. Not only do Dreams' robust design and sharing tools offer endless possibilities to creators, they've also resulted in a growing tidal wave of fun, hilarious, and moving gameplay experiences for players.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	Cornsistency. You know, the consistency of corn?

AWARDS

gameinformer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
gameinformer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
gameinformer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

For more information on the age classification ratings in our reviews, head to gameinformer.com/ratings

WANDER > WONDER
Corolla
DJB 952

The Greater Than Ever Corolla

With an all-new sleek design and Toyota Safety Sense™ 2.0[1] standard, your journey can be stylish and safe, wherever you might be headed. ***Let's Go Places.***

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Observation

The thrill of taking back control

9

GOLD

Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Devolver Digital **Developer** No Code **Release** May 21 **Rating** M

PS4 • PC

» Concept
You and your colleague are trying to figure out what's gone wrong aboard a space station. Plot twist: You are the space station

» Graphics
The memorable setting and characters are brought to life with impressive textures and lighting that heightens the dread

» Sound
From its creepy electronic score to all the station's creaks and terrifying noises, Observation sounds as good as it looks

» Playability
Navigating the station is easy thanks to a snappy interface and simple controls

» Entertainment
Observation is a fantastic horror game thanks to its twisting plot, well-realized setting, and challenging puzzles

» Replay Value
Moderately high

Horror games are often loud and immediate when it comes to the shocks they deliver. Even the more restrained of the genre's offerings, like Soma and Amnesia, often have indestructible hunters that consistently instill smaller jolts of fright pursuing you. Observation is different, trading pulse-pounding scares for a sense of creeping fear. You play a space station's artificial intelligence in the aftermath of a disaster, and this angle on puzzles and exploration produces a unique kind of horror – one that takes the time it needs to tell an ambitious story without interruption, letting players marinate in its lake of dread before unveiling the terrors at its core.

You awaken on the station (itself called Observation) to find a scientist, Emma Fisher, begging you for help as the structure groans and burns all around you. S.A.M. (an acronym for "Systems, Administration, and Maintenance") is the A.I. in charge of taking care of the crew of Observation. S.A.M.'s memory cores and most of its functionalities have been wiped in the wake of whatever catastrophe has struck the station, meaning that as S.A.M., you have no idea what has happened and are at the mercy of Emma as she works to help you get all your functions back online.

Uncovering what happened to Observation is the heart of the game, and it's a hell of a plot, packed with constant twists that leave a trail intriguing and unsettling questions. What is the role of Observation's crew? Are any of them still alive? Is S.A.M. a victim in all of this, or is it responsible for the disaster? And what else is lurking on the station beside you two? While these plot points all have satisfying resolutions, my favorite part of the narrative was watching Emma and S.A.M.'s relationship develop as the story creeps along. Emma fluctuates between trusting and suspicious, and who can blame her when S.A.M. can't even verify that it's not responsible for damaging the station?

The pair's symbiotic relationship is reinforced neatly in the gameplay as well, with Emma needing S.A.M. to restore functions to the station and open doors for her to reach new places. In turn, Emma gives you power-ups that grant you more maneuverability and access to the station's various functions. Initially you can only manually operate various cameras in different wings of the station (think Five Nights at Freddy's), zooming in on laptops and documents to obtain useful, story-progressing data. Eventually, you gain the ability to move throughout the station as a drone in order to conduct repairs and help Emma get where she needs to go. While these tasks sound mundane, they're fun puzzles that help set Observation apart from horror-based walking simulators. For example, to bring back the power in one wing of the station, you need to restart various generators around the room. Jumping from camera to camera to access laptops and folders around the room gives you access to the schematics that you can use to dive in to the generators themselves and reboot them via a quick memorization puzzle. Other obstacles you have to overcome include time trials, math problems, and line puzzles. Observation is satisfying because its constant and well-designed puzzles make you an activate participant in the action as opposed to just an avatar wandering around. I needed a notepad to get me through a number of the harder puzzles, so you can expect to be challenged – but not to an unfair degree.

While there are no game-over states, failing to solve certain puzzles alters segments of the story in subtle and neat ways I won't spoil here. Besides progressing through the plot, solving puzzles also helps S.A.M. The further you get, the more access to different wings of the (giant) space station you gain, eventually letting you jump from place to place like the eye of an all-seeing god. Outside of some fantastic plot-specific moments, this function is useful for exploring the station in search of optional collectibles like audio logs, photos, and journals that help flesh out the crew and take in some of the impressive architecture both in and outside the station.

Observation (the space station) is a strong setting. Instead of a techno-haunted-house aesthetic, it uses realistic NASA-style construction with blue panels, sterile white walls, and constrained tunnels adorned with posters and family photos that serve as a cramped home for the crew. These trappings make the station feel eerily familiar; watching such a realistic space shift into something more horrific over time is an unnerving experience, with the literal structure of the station changing depending on what happens to it throughout the story. Even the act of moving through that space in either camera mode or as the drone is disturbing, as you never know what gruesome scene might be around the bend.

I ripped through Observation in one six-hour sitting, propelled forward by the novel blend of challenging puzzles and gripping storytelling. Though at first glance, Observation may appear to be your traditional first-person horror game, I've never played anything quite like it. Challenging and unnerving in equal measure, Observation shouldn't be missed by anyone in search of a mind-bending and unsettling thrill.

» Javy Gwaltney

Rage 2

A blunted bloodbath

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Bethesda Softworks **Developer** id Software, Avalanche Studios **Release** May 14 **Rating** M

7

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
Shoot and drive your way through hordes of enemies in defiance of the Authority

» **Graphics**
For such an "extreme" vision of the post-apocalypse, the visuals feel muted and sometimes drab

» **Sound**
The sporadic F-bombs seem like they are trying too hard to be edgy, and they never land with impact. The crunchy blasting of bullets and heavy metal during overdrive massacres carry some oomph, though

» **Playability**
Shooting your weapons and zipping around in various vehicles through the open world is easy, though navigating through multiple menus can be a slog

» **Entertainment**
Rage 2 fails to deliver any interesting characters, environments, or activities. Solid shooting and cool weapons lift up the other elements of this lackluster title

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

Rage 2 is a disparate experience. The shooting and arsenal are top-notch, allowing players to wield great weapons like a kickass shotgun that dishes out deadly spreads and potent focused fire with an alternate attack. That combat is enhanced by an overdrive mechanic that lets you cut loose and absolutely destroy hordes of enemies in a psychedelic bloodbath as you gain more powerful attacks and serious life regeneration during these berserker states. But outside of the heat of battle, Rage 2 has serious flaws including weak characters, boring activities and enemies, and an absolute snoozer of a shallow open world.

You play as Walker, last of the rangers, on a mission against General Cross and the evil Authority. The world serves up deserts, houses, swamps, sewers, and more, but the areas all blend together in sort of a grayish mush of by-the-book bland activities that get monotonous fast. Stopping to kill your fifth Authority tower for a couple of bucks and some upgrade points hardly gets the pulse pounding, and going off-road to explore rarely feels rewarding, because there's simply nothing exciting out there to find.

You encounter all kinds of completely forgettable wasteland denizens as enemies and allies, mutants and townsfolk. Everyone is trying as hard as possible to be edgy and failing, delivering swear words with all the enthusiasm of a sleeping accountant. You fight the same dumb mutant mini-boss over and over. You unlock some cool vehicles to cruise around the world, and even get to drive a tank, but going from point to point and taking on the occasional convoy feels like mundane filler. While you engage in a variety of activities during your romp through the wasteland, almost everything boils down to slaughtering a slew of enemies. Which is fine on a basic level, because that's Rage 2's strong point.

You can upgrade your weapons for significant power boosts, like incredibly fast reload times, speedier shooting, and armor breaking. The weapons feel great, and mowing down a sewer full of mutants or a roadblock of goons is a blast. Chaining kills and working into the berserker state is fun, as you unleash hell on wave after wave of mutants and desert dwellers. Some of the longer encounters of the game have you in a constant state of overdrive, where you can feel a glimmer of the uncontrolled bloodlust from which the game gets its name. Moments like these are what save Rage 2 from its otherwise monotonous shackles, combining the great gunplay with nano-fueled abilities that let you crash into the ground from above or revive yourself after death.

While traversing the land, tons of various landmarks and side destinations await discovery, but they're all lackluster diversions that lose their shine after you've done each type of encounter a few times. Whether you're blowing up a turret or going sewer-crawling to smash some pods, you can see the vast majority of what the side content offers after a few hours. While the critical path takes about 8 to 10 hours for someone rushing through, Rage 2 has tons of optional content to explore – you just won't want to do it. Outside of the obvious perks like unlocking new weapons and abilities, it all starts to feel samey, bland, and boring.

For all of its attempts at garish glitter, Rage 2 is a muted, cliché, and uninspiring experience that's propped up by spectacular shooting and neverending battles that sometimes live up to the promise of a carnival of carnage.
» **Daniel Tack**

Trover Saves The Universe

Hilarious, bizarre, and familiar

7.75

PSVR • PS4 • PC

» Concept
Justin Roiland, co-creator of *Rick and Morty*, takes you on a bizarre world-hopping action/platforming adventure to save your dogs and coincidentally, the universe

» Graphics
Simple and imaginative, the worlds, and the characters who inhabit them, are colorful and downright weird

» Sound
Justin Roiland's great improvisational performance style is on full display, and the rest of the cast delivers an equally hilarious range of memorable voices and characters

» Playability
Controlling Trover and swinging his sword feels good, but the camera perspective in or out of VR sometimes makes him a little hard to track

» Entertainment
Combat, puzzles, and exploration feel familiar and unspectacular, but the bizarre story and hilarious dialogue set it apart

» Replay Value
Moderately low

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Squanch Games **Developer** Squanch Games **Release** May 31 (June 4, PC) **Rating** M

Trover Saves the Universe comes from the undeniably strange mind of Justin Roiland, known as the co-creator of *Rick and Morty*. You won't find those two animated characters anywhere in Trover Saves the Universe, but the sensibility and humor of that show (including the moments when it goes too far and gets gross) are on full display. The dialogue, story, and jokes are all well done, but the by-the-numbers gameplay delivers a familiar action/platforming experience, even in VR.

In this universe, you are an alien confined to a chair called a Chairorpian. Your two dogs are stolen by an all-powerful Abstainer, which he uses to give himself godlike powers. With your dogs in jeopardy, Trover is sent to help you recover them, which will also save the universe. The premise starts insane and maintains a high level of compelling ridiculousness.

You are the Chairorpian, but you control Trover from the comfort of your chair as you work together to track down upgrades like double jumps and better attacks. You make your way through the universe by solving puzzles and beating up bad guys. The combat is straightforward and rarely requires more than simply mashing the attack button, and the puzzles and platforming rarely challenge, but controlling Trover feels good. Those elements feel like they're only in place to move you through the bizarre story, and as a facilitator of that goal, the combat, platforming, and puzzle solving get the job done.

Trover Saves the Universe never takes itself seriously while telling its story, but maintains a cohesive narrative. Trover grows as a person, the antagonist has surprisingly sympathetic motivations, and it all ends in a satisfying way that is well-punctuated by Trover running around and yelling about the best ending ever. But while all that is happening, Trover and others constantly break the fourth wall, referring to the adventure as "the game" or complaining about the budget. Some line readings even feature the actors erupting into fits of legitimate laughter as they clearly struggle to not break. It gives everything about the experience a casual, improvisational feel and I laughed alongside the cast during many moments. I'm impressed with how the game incorporates absurdity while still telling a compelling story.

Sometimes the humor goes too far and delves into gross subject matter, but it always made me laugh by catching me off-guard. Its best jokes are the ones that play into the relationship between the player and video games. It pokes fun at how players do what they're told regardless of consequence and openly complains about puzzles until Trover just bypasses them with brute force, as a few examples. Interacting with the assorted characters is also well done as they react realistically to you hitting them with your sword or walking away in the middle of a conversation. I particularly like choosing the obviously wrong answers when given the chance to respond yes or no to questions, as it always leads to interesting and funny dialogue.

Much like the rest of Roiland's work, Trover Saves the Universe probably won't be for everyone. The narrative and cast of characters are weird, but this is a game made by a team of people who clearly love the medium of video games, embracing its shortcomings for well-executed jokes and delivering satisfying and often hilarious moments throughout. **» Kyle Hilliard**

With Or Without VR?

Playing in VR is optional and I didn't find one mode necessarily better than the other. I liked controlling the camera and aiming a special ability unlocked later in the story with my head in VR, but using the right control stick for those actions is a perfectly viable alternative if you don't own PSVR or don't like wearing the headset. The important elements, like the humor and story, come across with or without the aid of VR.

Shakedown: Hawaii

A delightfully hostile takeover

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Devolver Digital **Developer** VBlank Entertainment **Release** May 7 **Rating** T

8

PS4 • Switch
Vita • PC

» Concept
Rebuild your ~~criminal~~ legitimate enterprise through intimidation, fraud, and old-school GTA-style beatdowns

» Graphics
Whether you're exploring the open world or watching one of the many animated cutscenes, the visual style is a pixelated wonder

» Sound
The synthwave soundtrack is a perfect accompaniment to the onscreen carnage, and it has enough variety to keep you from pressing mute right away

» Playability
The story might be amusing, but the controls are no joke. The action is quick and precise, with few moments of frustration

» Entertainment
Bite-sized missions and an engaging empire-building layer make Shakedown: Hawaii a great destination – whether you have minutes or hours to spare

» Replay Value
Moderately high

Your empire is crumbling. These darn kids aren't renting videotapes anymore, and who wants to wait around for a taxi when an app will summon a driver at a moment's notice? Things aren't looking great for Shakedown: Hawaii's aging CEO, but he's not ready to throw in the beach towel. Over the course of his hilarious journey, you reclaim his position on the big island and thrive while sticking it to his rivals in the process.

Shakedown: Hawaii takes the essence of classic top-down GTA and arcade shooters and infuses it with a wry comic sensibility that hits its mark with the same degree of accuracy as its arcade-precise weapons. You primarily step into the flip-flops of the CEO, but you also take to Hawaii's streets as his idiotic son (and wannabe DJ) Scooter and business associate Al. Their goal is simple: Build up an open-world business empire as quickly as possible while also catering to the outlandish whims of these darn kids and their newfangled ways.

Early missions quickly highlight the arsenal of weapons, which are just another tool for this cutthroat businessman. You have run-of-the-mill pistols and machine guns, as well as less orthodox tools of destruction, like scissors, hair driers, and Contra-like spread guns. The island is teeming with life and detail, and even if you miss a shot, it's likely to result in a satisfying amount of destruction. Indulging in open-world chaos is reliably fun, but sooner or later you're going to need to get to business, in more ways than one.

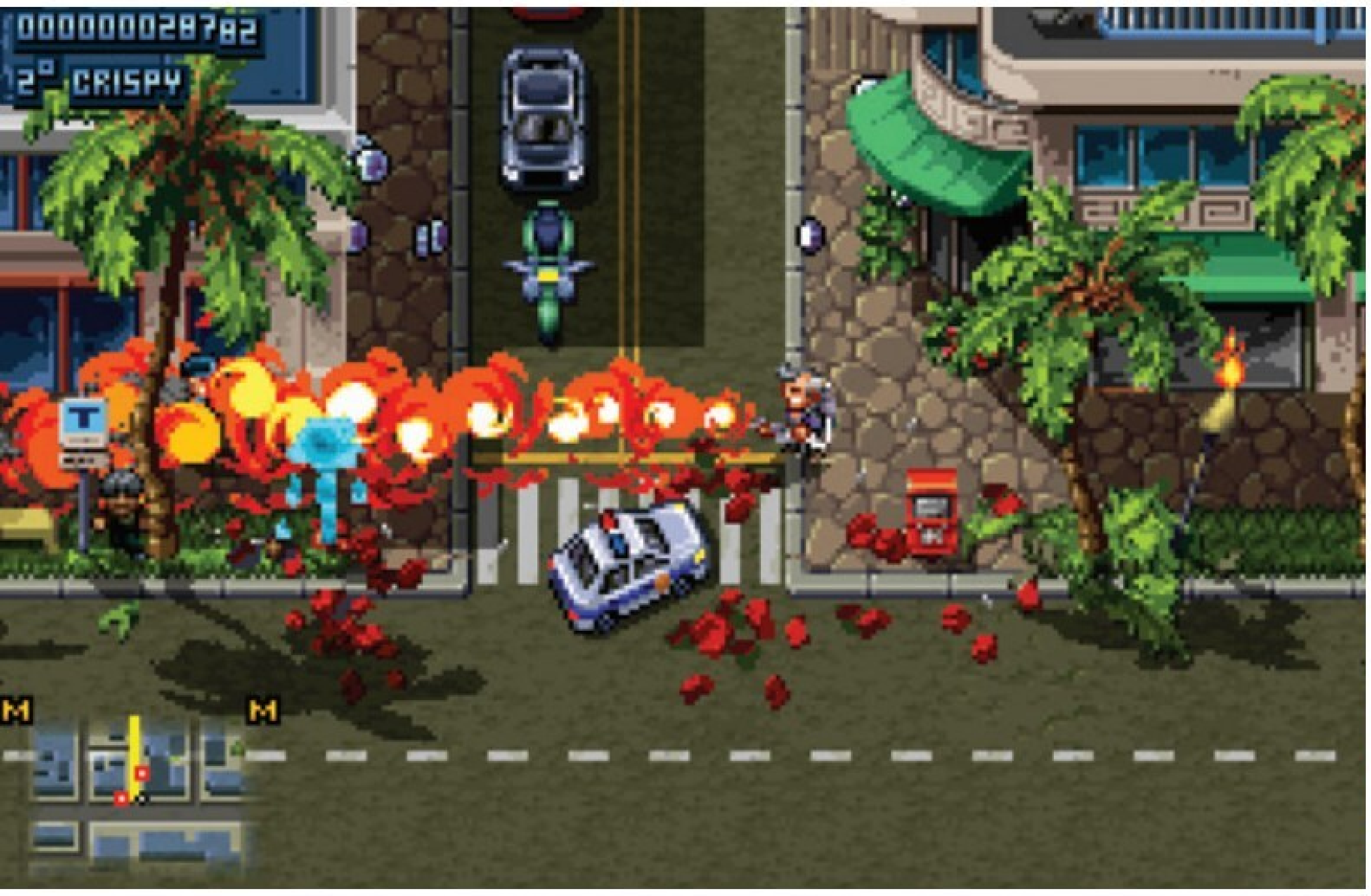
The titular shakedowns are home to some of the best and silliest moments. Before you can get your cut of profits from businesses, you need to intimidate the workers to show them how serious you are about forming a new "partnership." Sometimes that means punching a mannequin until the owner agrees to your terms. Or you might have to flush some paper towels down the office commode until the pipes burst. That barber has a nice head of hair – it sure would be a shame if someone cut it all off. I was pleasantly surprised at how many different ways there were to show these civilians who's boss. You have dozens of these shakedowns to discover, and even though scenarios repeat, they're quick and fun enough to prevent them from feeling like a chore.

You can spend your cash on cosmetics, weapons, and a handful of character upgrades, but that's short-term thinking. The real money is in real estate, which is also where the game shines during its first few hours. You can purchase a variety of different properties on the island, and most of those acquisitions generate even more cash. Eventually you can purchase upgrades for each property, which further multiply the amount of revenue your corporation earns from each location. The interface isn't quite up to the task, however. I loved watching the numbers climb, but multipliers have to be purchased individually – a significant detail, considering there are more than 400 different locations you can potentially invest in. It's tedious, and it starts to feel like, well, work.

Most of these multipliers are tied to story missions, in which your aging CEO encounters a contemporary frustration like in-store credit cards or multilevel marketing. Told through animated vignettes, these moments tackle modern life with a scathing wit, whether they're setting their sights on artisanal foods, medical quackery, or – in one particularly great sequence – the video game industry. Even though the CEO does some cartoonishly awful things in the game, his "get off my lawn" attitude is endearing and made me look forward to every beat of the lengthy story.

Unfortunately, the game's frugal economy quickly gives way to an overabundance of cash. It feels like a weird complaint, but in the last third of the game my company's value had ballooned to the point where money didn't have any meaning. Once you're satisfied with the way your CEO's sprite looks and have maxed out the affordable character upgrades, you have nothing else to look forward to in the economic layer. When my scheming opened up new buying opportunities in the campaign, I was able to buy buildings immediately and max out each upgrade chain without even bothering to look at the price tags. It fits into the riches-to-more-riches story, but the lack of aspirational purchases flattens an otherwise fun system by the end.

The economy might be a little wonky, but Shakedown: Hawaii delivers a nice blast of classic arcade action and some solid laughs. A wealth of entertaining missions and a generous overall structure show that while the game's CEO might be out of touch, developer VBlank most definitely isn't. » **Jeff Cork**



A Plague Tale: Innocence

A rat-infested gem

7.5

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
A group of battle-hardened children struggle to survive a plague-ridden world during the middle ages

» **Graphics**
This recreation of 14th-Century France is vibrant and detailed. The rat swarms are appropriately creepy, but sometimes struggle to accurately navigate the environment

» **Sound**
This voice acting is impressive for a cast full of kids, and the score helps drive home the tension at the right moments

» **Playability**
Combat is a bit clumsy but functional. Sadly, the stealth sequences are boring

» **Entertainment**
A Plague Tale excels in its narrative and setting, but the moment-to-moment action is uninspired

» **Replay Value**
Moderately low

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Focus Home Interactive **Developer** Asobo Studio **Release** May 14 **Rating** M

The middle ages were harsh. Deadly plagues ravaged entire villages, bandits laid in wait to pillage weary travelers, and those who survived even common illnesses could be undone by the era's insane medical practices. But the version of the 14th century in A Plague Tale is even deadlier. After the murder of their parents, two kids discover how sacrifices must be made to survive in the wild. Sadly, A Plague Tale manages to be both a harrowing journey and a bit of a slog.

Asobo's recreation of France circa 1349 is visually breathtaking, and its heartbreaking survival tale about two young orphans was so compelling I couldn't look away. Amicia de Rune is a 15-year-old girl entrusted with the care of her kid brother Hugo. Meanwhile, Hugo is a sheltered, wide-eyed child stricken with a debilitating illness. Their journey forces both kids to wade through rivers of black, flesh-eating rats while dodging bands of patrolling Inquisition soldiers. Aside from a few awkward dialogue moments, A Plague Tale's narrative is emotionally driven and earnest, and I was quickly absorbed by the political conspiracy that consumes these two kids.

As Amicia, you spend a fair amount of time holding Hugo's hand, helping him climb over ledges and shielding him from environmental dangers. I never felt burdened by Hugo's presence; on the contrary, I felt something close to a sibling bond as I sheltered him from trouble, and I grew nervous every time I sent him off on his own into small crawlspace to unlock a door or fetch a torch. Hugo is an adorable and innocent child, and the relationship between these two kids is genuinely touching.

While A Plague Tale's narrative had me racing towards the credits, the basic gameplay is full of speedbumps. One of the biggest threats to the de Rune children's safety is a plague of black rats that scurry through the shadows and threaten to overwhelm any living creature. The rats are terrified of light, and most environmental puzzles involve finding fire and using it to create a safe path. A simplified crafting system allows you to create consumables such as explosives or rat bait, and I liked being able to control fire, but I rarely felt a need to scour the environment for crafting materials, because you often find the necessary components only a few feet from every puzzle. Also, most puzzles usually have an obvious solution, so instead of feeling like I was cleverly engineering my way out of a jam, I felt like I was just going through the motions.

When you're not dealing with rats, you're dodging Inquisition soldiers who have orders to separate you from your brother and drop your corpse in a rat nest. Amicia is equipped with a sling and can hurl rocks like bullets at enemy temples, and the generous auto-aim helps compensate for its clumsy controls. You're generally better off running and hiding from a fight, but the stealth mechanics are weak. While I never grew tired of extinguishing an enemy's torch and watching the rats swarm them, most stealth sequences tested my patience more than my wits. Enemies have basic patrol routes and the environments are so small that you often only have one route to your destination. As a result, throwing rocks to distract enemies has all the tension and pacing of hitting the button at a crosswalk.

A Plague Tale is a double tragedy. On one hand, Amicia and Hugo's tear-filled journey through rural France is marked by adversity, but the bigger misfortune is how this powerful story of sibling love is soured by simple puzzles and clunky stealth mechanics. A Plague Tale is a forgettable game wrapped around a memorable adventure. » **Ben Reeves**

Void Bastards

Scavenging the fun

Style 1-Player Action/Shooter **Publisher** Humble Bundle **Developer** Blue Manchu **Release** May 29 **Rating** M

Strip away the thematic concepts and storytelling, and a game like BioShock focuses on creative problem-solving. How do I confront and control a space through the use of unusual tools, stealth, and outright assault, and come out the other end better for the exchange? Void Bastards explores that core dynamic with a procedural loop, focusing on opportunities for strategy and improvement, and eschewing characters and story with an almost nihilistic abandon. The result is a relatively pure flow of discovery and mastery for many hours, diminished only by an eventual sense of rote.

Mirroring the darkest corners of Douglas Adams' sci-fi vision of outer space overwhelmed by bureaucracy, you play a smattering of mostly minor criminals who have been "dehydrated" into snack-sized bags of powder. When a hazardous nebula turns a transport's crew feral, a mindless computer rehydrates you to get the ship out of danger. The relatively simple task is complicated by inane jobs set by the ship, like the need to laminate an ID card to authorize shipboard control, so it's off to explore the wrecks of nearby ships (and their mutated crews) to find the requisite supplies.

Borrowing elements from the roguelite genre, each prisoner rockets off with the same crafted weapons, armor, and tools left behind by your last unfortunate expired protagonist. You manage food, fuel, and wandering spaceborne threats like pirates to avoid certain death in the void. Instead, you face certain death onboard the ships on which you're gathering supplies. If you're lucky, you return with the parts, only to face another bureaucratic hurdle. The dark absurdist humor shines through, even as the repeated deaths mostly lose their sting, since you're still consistently progressing broader goals regardless of who you are controlling.

Each ship you visit is a strategic challenge, filled with perverse enemies, helpful supplies, and stations you can work to solve the puzzle. The helm has a map of supply locations, but you need to turn on the power generator in a different room first. The drill you need is in the Hab unit, but you need to deactivate the gun turret in the security room to reach it. Everything is interconnected, and I enjoyed learning the many ways to manipulate the varied ship configurations encountered through the smart procedural generation.

Along the way, the insane and mutated ship crews stand in your way at nearly every turn, each spouting incoherent ramblings that not-so-subtly jab at modern-day society. Matronly supervisors berate you for being late to your shift. Scrambling short-statured "Juves" gleefully scream profanities to see if they can shock you. Spooks sneak up behind you and disappear from view as you begin to attack.

Enemies each offer their own challenges to avoid or defeat, and further complicate the riddle of navigating any given ship. Environmental factors like radiation, fire, and oil slicks add yet another layer of complexity. On top of it all, just as you master one enemy type or ship setup, you progress to more potent challenges. On that front, I appreciate the adjustable difficulty; roguelites can sometimes feel calibrated to only welcome hardcore players, but Void Bastards can be customized to welcome anyone from casual to veteran.

A thoughtfully imagined crafting system provides minor player-set goals in the midst of the set tasks that push the adventure forward. With enough recycled materials, you can create different weapons, protective armors, and other helpful equipment. From the shotgun-like stapler to the clusterflak gun, the weapons and explosives are silly and fun to use, even if it's frustrating to be low on ammo for the weapon you currently need the most.

Void Bastards' biggest dilemma is in the sense of repetition that emerges after several hours. Even with smart procedural generation, ship layouts eventually begin to feel too similar, and enemy configurations feel like frustrating road blocks rather than meaningful encounters. And while the storytelling does its job of reinforcing a sort of anarchic and cynical view of how meaningless life can seem, that theme doesn't do any favors to helping a player feel invested over time.

Even so, there is an ending of sorts, and Void Bastards seems to recognize that it's running out of steam within a few hours after the tedium kicks in. Even in those final hours, I was still impressed by the consistent tone, smart mix of stealth and action, and the tension of managing your characters' lean chances of survival. Void Bastards is funny, misanthropic, and yet still fun to play, and even after arising from some pretty clear inspirations, manages to feel like its own mutated beast.

» **Matt Miller**

8

Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
Scrounge and scavenge derelict spaceships while employing stealth, strategy, and shooting

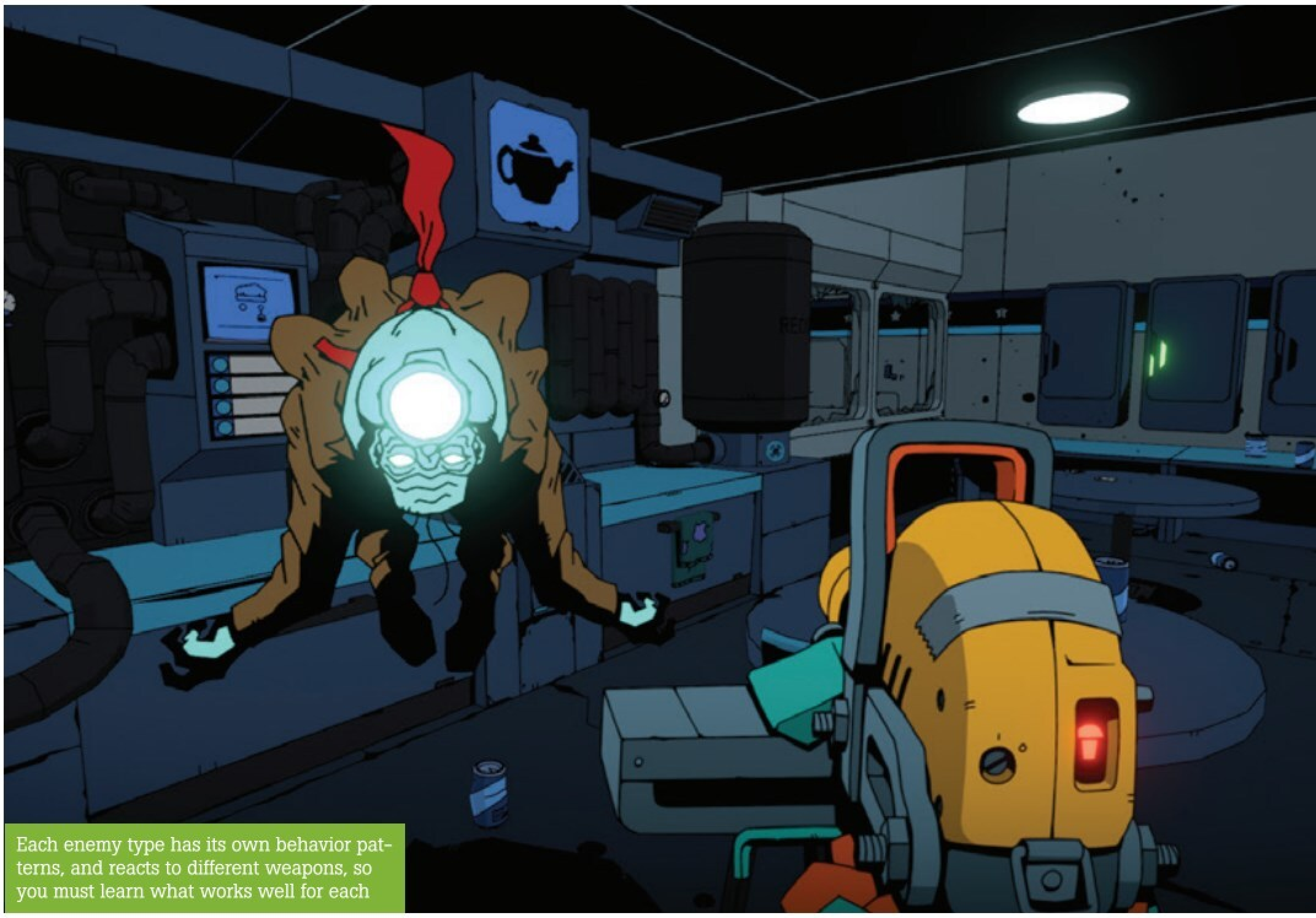
» **Graphics**
Colorful comic-book aesthetics are juxtaposed with grotesque mutant designs to create a memorable visual style

» **Sound**
The ambient voices and sound effects stand out, helping to inform the way you approach an encounter

» **Playability**
Controls feel tight and responsive, and the wide variety of weapons and tools are intuitive to use

» **Entertainment**
Void Bastards provides a clever twist on the gameplay model popularized by System Shock 2 and BioShock, now with a procedural element to aid in long-term engagement

» **Replay Value**
Moderate



Each enemy type has its own behavior patterns, and reacts to different weapons, so you must learn what works well for each

Dreams

Bringing your imagination to life

9.5

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

gameinformer GOLD

Style 1 to 4-Player Compilation **Publisher** Sony Interactive Entertainment
Developer Media Molecule **Release** April 16 **Rating** T

PS4

» Concept
Give players a robust toolset to create and share their own games, or specialize in one aspect of game development

» Graphics
Dreams' ingenious Fleck system allows non-artists to create visually arresting scenes in minutes

» Sound
The included library of instruments and effects provides plenty of flexibility, but the ability to record and upload your own sound banks is next-level

» Playability
Dreams' gyroscopic controls massively simplify the movement of objects in 3D space, but they have raised accessibility concerns for some players

» Entertainment
With an ever-growing wealth of content, few games continually surprise or amaze like Dreams

» Replay Value
High

More than any developer, Media Molecule has been driven by a singular goal: to empower players to make and share their own games. LittleBigPlanet focused this concept on the 2D platformer, but clever players spent years devising ways to stretch and twist their creations beyond the genre's confines. With the release of Dreams, Media Molecule obliterates those confines completely, giving players a broad and flexible suite of development tools to create whatever their hearts desire. Dreams may not strictly be a game, but the tools are easy and intuitive enough to make the creation process fun for everyone, which delivers a wealth of entertaining experiences noncreators can enjoy.

As someone who spent hours tinkering with LittleBigPlanet's editors but never published a single level, I didn't hold a lot of hope for what I could create in Dreams. At best, I figured I'd muddle my way through the myriad tutorials, then spend most of my time "surfing" the creations of other more talented players. Instead, the reality has been the reverse, my skepticism replaced by continual astonishment at the possibilities Dreams offers.

Foundational controls make sculpting and moving objects in 3D space a breeze, a visual programming language eases novices into computer logic, and a streamlined interface lets you hop between editing and playing prototypes instantaneously. You still need to devote several sessions to learning the ropes from Media Molecule's video tutorials, but I can't overstate how smartly designed everything is, and it makes the creation process feel less like work and more like experimental play.

Not only can anyone piece together a prototype out of primitive shapes, they can also make it beautiful with Dreams' ground-breaking art tools. Much of the magic lies in Flecks, small artistic brush strokes applied to the surface of every object that result in the game's evocative, dream-like aesthetic. These Flecks can turn a simple hemisphere into a lush, grassy knoll in seconds. If you've ever felt the frustrating sting of having a drawing fail to live up to your imagination, Dreams delivers the opposite sensation – I've been routinely surprised by how much better my creations turn out than I expected.

No matter how easy Media Molecule makes it, more people will want to just play games than create them. Again I was skeptical of what Dreams would have to offer, and again I was pleasantly proven wrong.

Part of the entertainment of playing other people's games stems from the novelty of knowing they used the same tools as you ("How did they make that?!"), but I've also played plenty that are fun in their own right, from simple puzzle games to clever platformers to throwback arcade games. One user's riff on Geometry Wars is so polished you could easily mistake it for the real thing. A 3D Bomberman prototype already looks better than any official title Konami released in years. At this point, most offerings are bite-sized experiences or works-in-progress, but Dreams has only been in early access a few weeks, and the amount of content is expanding exponentially.

Even with a healthy selection of tutorials, Dreams pushes you out of the nest a little too early, leaving you to figure out some of the more advanced gadgets and variables on your own. Media Molecule also offers little guidance in the way of actual game design lessons, a role the studio is uniquely qualified to provide. It's no wonder many players have focused on creating clones of other games instead of tackling their own ideas. Dreams' ongoing development may very well fix this, as Media Molecule says it intends to add more tutorials and masterclasses, but I hope it also fleshes out the number of gameplay templates, genre examples, and design exercises.

Dreams is an idealistic vision of game development, where people create, collaborate, and share games purely for the love of gaming. No Dreams game may ever reach the polish of a triple-A title, but they also lack the cynical business side of game development, where test groups and microtransactions take precedence over unbridled creativity. The prospect that we'll someday see future developers who got their start in Dreams seems inevitable, but also moot – in a very real sense, Dreams players already are game developers. We may have longer to wait for the official release and Media Molecule's single-player story levels, but Dreams is already a magnificent wellspring for those who love playing, creating, and thinking about games in all their many forms.

» Jeff Marchiafava

Vader Immortal: Episode 1

A satisfying journey to the dark side

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Oculus **Developer** ILMxLAB **Release** May 21 **Rating** E10+

Star Wars fans will soon get the chance to travel to the Galaxy's Edge theme park to live out a fantasy of being a Jedi, smuggler, or more likely, a collector of expensive toys and plastic cups. If you don't have the funds for a pricey Disney vacation, Vader Immortal is another way to achieve an intimate Star Wars experience. In this first episode of this three-part series, you spend time on a starship, get your own lightsaber, and learn just how bad of shots the stormtroopers really are. You also come face-to-face with Darth Vader.

Being in the presence of Vader is a fascinating moment, as it reinforces what an imposing figure he is. I took a step back when he entered the room and crowded my location. This series, penned by David S. Goyer (one of the writers behind *The Dark Knight* trilogy of films), gives the player a voyeuristic look inside of Vader's world. When the episode begins, you are on your ship, the *Windfall*, enjoying a quiet moment with your co-pilot, a droid named ZOE3. This new character is voiced by actress Maya Rudolph who is bubbling with personality and wit, making her a great addition in the Star Wars universe.

In this tranquil moment of play, you can walk around your ship (using either the analog stick for fluid movement or a warp system) and interact with various objects in your living quarters. You can hold up and examine an interesting relic from Jedha, check your travel log to see what planets you've been to, and also throw on a helmet, which appears visually around your head. As you conduct diagnostic work on your ship, you are pulled out of hyperspace and down to the planet Mustafar. The Empire wants you for something.

Your vessel flies along the planet's molten surface and eventually comes to rest inside Vader's fortress. The amount of visual detail provided in this opening sequence is impressive. If you look up when standing in your cockpit, you see a massive star destroyer moving into position overhead. As you dock in Vader's lair, stormtroopers are everywhere, many raising their guns to greet you. The first few minutes of play deliver the feeling that you are a part of a legitimate Star Wars adventure.

I don't want to give away too much, as the little moments and interactions are the true joys that come from this experience, but I will say I wasn't fond of my character being a silent protagonist. I understand ILMxLAB's desire to make players feel like they are present for this journey, but it makes the adventure feel more like a Disney World ride than a legitimate Star Wars story. Even if your character doesn't end up having a voice, being able to communicate in some way with your hands would have helped create a connection to the world and story.

Big revelations about Vader and his power-hungry crusade are made as this short 40-minute tale unfolds, and I adore where it ends up. It goes places I didn't expect, and dives deep into Mustafar's history along the way. This planet has plenty of secrets to tell, and some are delivered in this first episode; others are teased for future episodes. You learn that your character is also important to both the planet and Lord Vader.

Igniting a lightsaber is as cool as you would hope it to be in VR. Seeing the blade extend is mighty satisfying, as is hearing it hum as you wave it around. The saber also leaves scorch marks on the floor. Again, the little touches are great. Just don't expect much from the lightsaber when combat ensues. You are mostly asked to use this powerful weapon for countering techniques. You need to time your saber movements to knock back laser blasts and block saber strikes from robots. Though you can't die, some skill is involved in blocking two to three attacks in a row, which exposes an enemy and allows you to strike them down. Moving the saber quickly into position is fun, but you don't really feel like you are a threat at this point; which could be a story beat ILMxLAB is building up to.

Some of the better moments in this episode are when you don't have to use a lightsaber at all, and instead are asked to figure out ways to open doors. I know that sounds boring, but these little puzzles use your hands in clever ways, and make you feel like you are actually interacting with the environment. You are also asked to climb a few ladders and shimmy along pipes. These are the only two interactions that didn't go off without a hitch; my hand-grabs sometimes weren't recognized.

Outside of an odd tutorial sequence that completely derails the experience for a few minutes, the action and story flow nicely from moment to moment, creating a fun ride into the inner workings of the Dark Side. The lack of involvement you may have as a character is a minor quibble in an otherwise fascinating Star Wars story that puts its iconic villain in the spotlight more than I expected. I can't wait to see where this series goes next, as the tease at the end implies the Force will be explored in big ways. » **Andrew Reiner**

7.75

Rift • Quest

» **Concept**
A satisfying introduction to a three-part series that brings you into the heart of Darth Vader's world

» **Graphics**
Standing next to Vader is an awesome moment. Being blinded by the lightsaber in your hand is equally satisfying. High levels of detail are presented in both the characters and environments

» **Sound**
The voice work is excellent, with the highlight being Maya Rudolph as ZOE3. She helps set up the narrative in a fun way

» **Playability**
As fun as it is to swing the lightsaber around, it's mostly used for defensive techniques and doesn't deliver on the fantasy fans are likely hoping for. General movement and environmental interactions are handled well

» **Entertainment**
Combat is a weak spot, but the story is engaging to the point that I didn't want this episode to end

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

Total War: Three Kingdoms

Elegantly embellishing an era

8.5

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Strategy (8-Player Online) **Publisher** Sega **Developer** Creative Assembly **Release** May 23 **Rating** T

PC

» **Concept**
Unite the kingdom and become emperor in a world based on the Chinese epic *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*

» **Graphics**
From snow-scattered landscapes to beautiful cutscenes and animations, the graphics immerse you in a captivating and compelling land

» **Sound**
The sounds of clashing swords and prolonged sieges are standard, and solid music accompanies the brutal battles and political intrigue

» **Playability**
With countless choices to make (some even a game begins), the game is inherently complex with many layers of customization and strategy, despite massive onboarding options

» **Entertainment**
Three Kingdoms is a striking addition to the Total War series with plenty to love, though it takes a slight dip in on-the-field tactical choice

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

As a franchise, Total War is known for realism, with lowly axemen eating barrages of arrows as trebuchets tear into city walls. Then the Total War: Warhammer games bent those rules, and now that bending continues with Total War: Three Kingdoms, albeit in a less extreme fashion. This installment embraces Chinese fantasy in the era of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, with larger-than-life commanders and their reigns. History-driven battles take a backseat to lively hero duels and big personalities. The experience is more enjoyable if you're willing to suspend your disbelief and engage in a massive rise to power with a bit of wondrous awe – as if someone was regaling a crowded feasting hall with an embellished tale, rather than coldly narrating from the annals of a historical text.

On the real-time battlefield, the moment-to-moment tactics are a bit underplayed because of the focus on the legendary commanders and their skills. With various commander types to pick from, hooking them up with weapons, armor, and horses and tapping into their special abilities to turn the tide of battle feels flavorful and suitably epic. Watching two magnificent lords tear each other apart in a crazy one-on-one in the middle of a huge fight doesn't feel like traditional Total War, but it's pretty satisfying all the same. Battles are often won and lost on the backs of these epic encounters, which can leave the little men out.

One of the ways to play, called Romance mode, also has less of a realistic emphasis on how your armies consume resources and supplies; it's more about letting you get in and play around with your whimsical warriors of note. A separate option, Records mode, lets franchise purists dial back on the fantasy elements, with none of the insane powers and more realistic resource management for armies, but the major draw (and the place where the interesting innovation is happening) is on the fantasy-tinged side of the battlefield.

Three Kingdoms is beautiful on the turn-based map and beyond. Cherry blossoms bloom on your development tree, snow splashes softly across the land, and awesome animated cutscenes punctuate world events and major occurrences, capturing the pure romantic notion of ancient China. Your road to emperor through a combination of military might, city-building and expansion, and shrewd diplomacy is paved with elegant and exquisite detail that make it one of the most aesthetically appealing titles in the entire series.

Diplomacy, espionage, and trading are easy to work with and essential to ruling your ever-growing sphere of power off the battlefield. A streamlined system allows for single-click dealing and negotiations if you just want to get on with the next turn. Managing your relationships is critical, and it feels good to be held to your alliances and contracts or face fairly significant consequences. Myriad opportunities arise to make fun choices outside of your standard building and battling – faking my own assassination attempt to boost my image was a fun little side moment. Your characters also build and destroy reputation with each other in battle, so you can separate those that don't get along and put friends and family together. Your court is always ready to give you bonuses by installing commanders in various roles and positions.

While those looking for the pure historical war experience may find themselves wanting a bit more, with such a critical emphasis on the commanders and their supreme battlefield presence, those willing to indulge in a more prodigious past have lots to enjoy. With strict historical adherence out the window and a bit of a streamlined tactical combat experience, Three Kingdoms still has a lot to offer the strategy enthusiast. » **Daniel Tack**

Choosing whether to siege a city outright or to starve them out is an important decision

BoxBoy + BoxGirl

Another square deal

gameinformer SILVER

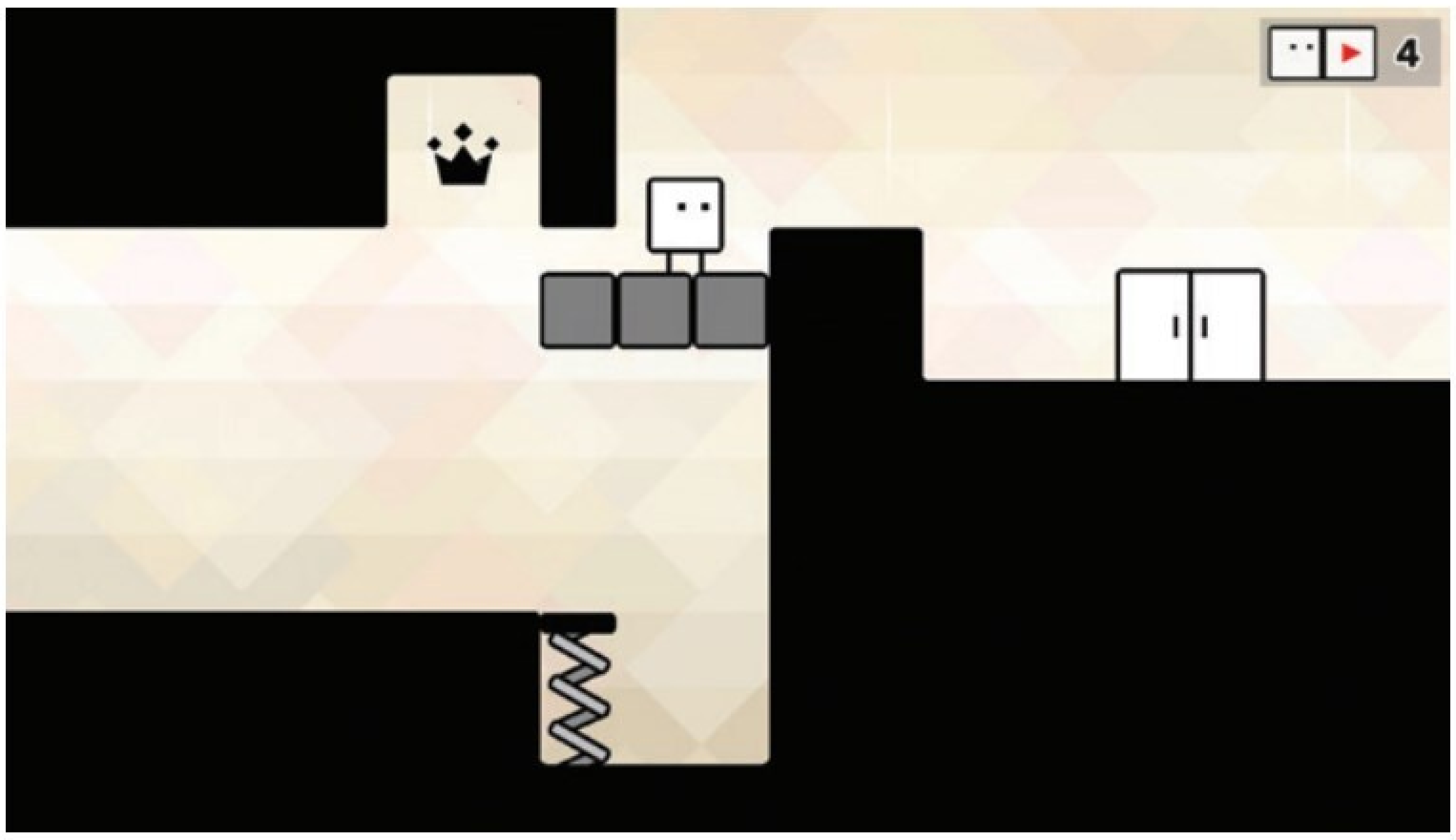
Style 1 or 2-Player Puzzle/Platforming **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** HAL Laboratory **Release** April 26 **Rating** E

BoxBoy never seemed like the kind of game that would develop into a series. When HAL Laboratory debuted BoxBoy on the 3DS back in 2015, this quirky puzzle platformer with low-fi graphics seemed like an experimental one-off that had somehow squeaked through the greenlight process. Since then, this little square-jawed hero has proven he's more than a one-hit wonder. For his fourth outing, BoxBoy is joined by BoxGirl and the tall box, Qudy, for a couch co-op friendly adventure filled with some of the most creative and diverse puzzles in the series.

BoxBoy's mechanics are deceptively simple. You are asked to string together a limited number of boxes to use as stairs, bridges, and other makeshift tools that allow you to navigate an austere and obstacle-riddled world. BoxBoy's plain aesthetic puts a spotlight on HAL's puzzle design. Early puzzles start off a little too easy, assuming players haven't engaged with the series before. However, as you slowly unlock new abilities, the puzzles become significantly more captivating and inventive.

Many of BoxBoy + BoxGirl's puzzles require some out-of-the-box thinking, but I was rarely stumped for more than a few minutes. If you ever get completely stuck, a hint system readily shows you the solution and can keep you from pulling out your hair. I also appreciate that you often have multiple ways to approach each objective. But if you really want to challenge yourself, you can tackle each level with a limited number of boxes, which earns you coins that can be redeemed for oddball cosmetic items. These cosmetics don't affect the gameplay, but I had a lot of fun dressing up my boxes as cat detectives and balding vampires.

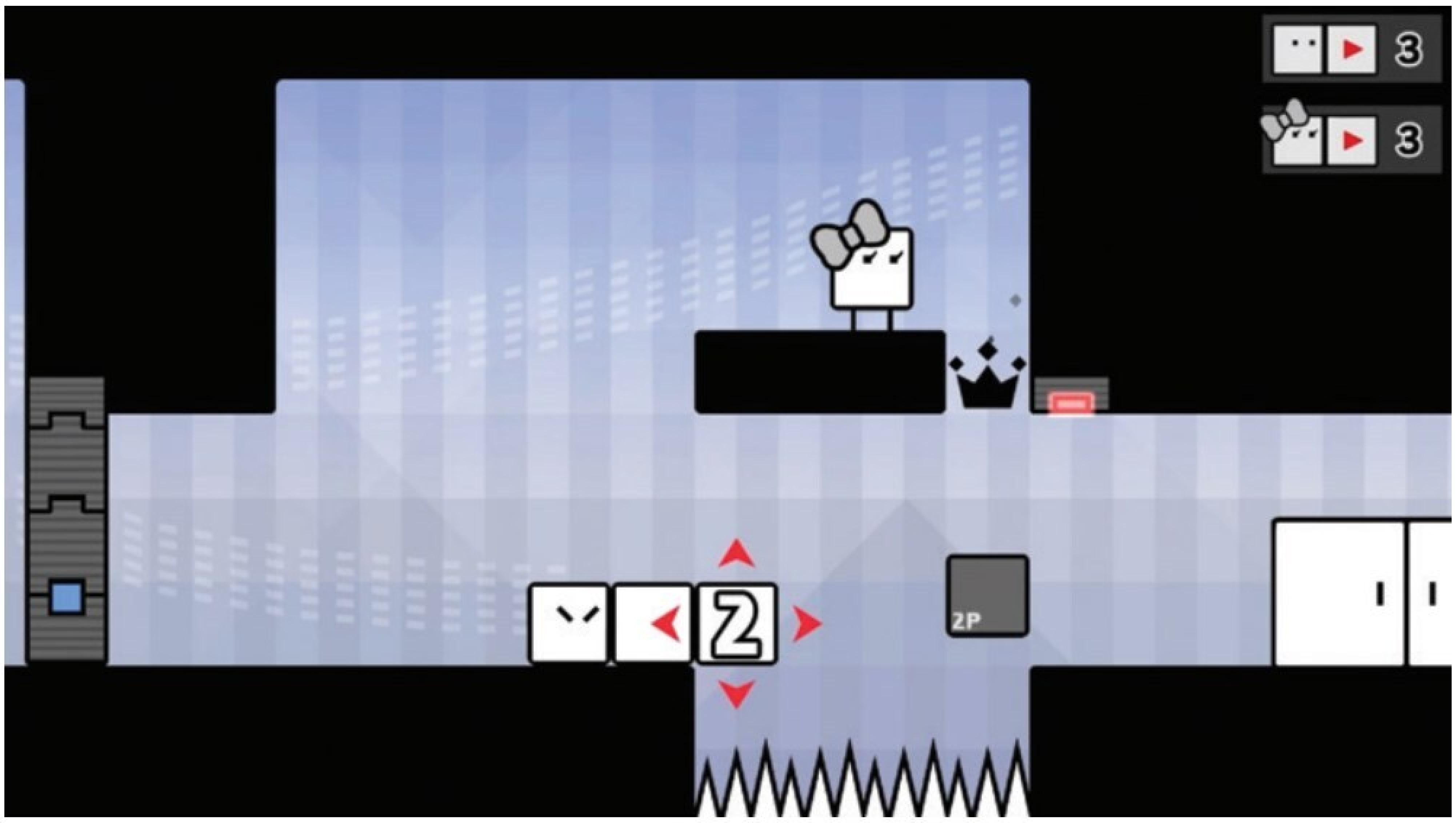
Some old power-ups return. For example, you can still chain boxes together like a grappling hook and zip to new areas, which is always fun. I was particularly surprised by BoxBoy's new skills, like his ability to fling boxes across the room or pound them into the ground. These new talents seem deceptively simple at first, but their merits are more apparent as you use them and each new level encourages you to use your abilities in novel ways. Every time I unlocked a new set of puzzles, I was surprised by the level of creativity and the unique solutions I was able to engineer from BoxBoy's offbeat toolset.



But BoxBoy is only one of the stars of this show. A second campaign starring both BoxBoy and BoxGirl allows two players to solve puzzles together. Many of the mechanics and themes from the single-player campaign return, but they are given new life since you have two sets of boxes at your disposal, and you can build increasingly unusual shapes. Some puzzles even ask you to navigate certain characters to specific points in the level, which is a neat twist. You can play through this campaign by yourself, switching between characters on the fly, but I had the most fun coordinating my box stacking with another player.

A third unlockable campaign stars an extra tall box named Qudy. Since Qudy's boxes are double-sized, he is able to quickly scale tall platforms and can practically vault over vast gaps. Qudy can rotate horizontally or vertically, which affects the orientation of his boxes. Again, this sounds like a simple change, but it has far-reaching consequences, and I was often left scratching my head trying to figure out how to squeeze Qudy's awkward body through a series of relatively simple-looking obstacles.

Despite consistent performance over the last several years, this blocky franchise remains relatively obscure, which is a shame because BoxBoy's adventures are engaging. HAL Laboratory does a great job shaking up the mechanics from one set of levels to the next so the action never grows stale, which seems extra impressive after four entries. We've already been given more BoxBoy games than I ever expected, but I hope they don't stop coming anytime soon. » **Ben Reeves**



8.5

Switch

» Concept
Use simple boxes to create complex shapes and solve a series of clever puzzles

» Graphics
The stark, black-and-white world is endearing, and the simple visuals put a spotlight on the stellar puzzle solving

» Sound
HAL Laboratory knows how to create light and cheerful background music, and that skill is evident here. Get ready to have the main theme stuck in your head

» Playability
The controls are simple, and a few new mechanics add welcome twists to the puzzle solving

» Entertainment
BoxBoy + BoxGirl hits the sweet spot with a series of puzzles that aren't too hard, but occasionally make you think

» Replay Value
Moderate

6 Layers Of Fear 2

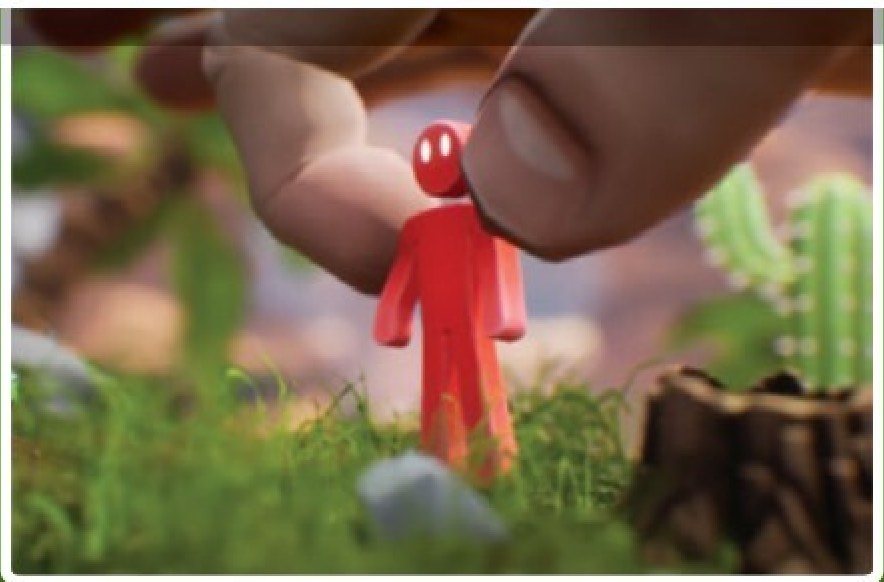
Platform PS4 • Xbox One • PC **Release** May 28 **Rating** M

It may excel at jolting you with quick scares, but the narrative and stakes are so obscure that real horror can't take root. *– Joe Juba*

8 Supraland

Platform PC **Release** April 5 **Rating** NR

The dialogue and combat shortcomings ultimately make up a small portion of Supraland's total experience. Exploring, tracking down upgrades, and solving the puzzles are where the game flexes its creativity and fun, and it leans on those strong elements with most of its weight to create a consistently compelling experience. *– Kyle Hilliard*



7.25 Team Sonic Racing

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC **Release** May 21 **Rating** E

Team Sonic Racing delivers a fun, easy-to-play experience that bolsters its adequate gameplay with distinct flavors to help it stand out from the rest of the genre. Unfortunately, the core gameplay provides mediocre action, limiting the fun of the otherwise promising racer. *– Brian Shea*

7.25 Life Is Strange 2: Episode 3 – Wastelands

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • PC **Release** May 9 **Rating** M

This episode continues following the ups and downs of their bond as the boys take refuge at a hippie camp and marijuana farm. It's a wild premise, but new characters are boxed-in stereotypes, and the episode struggles with poor pacing. *– Elise Favis*

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6 Astrologaster

Platform PC • iOS **Release** May 9 **Rating** 12+

Astrologaster has a unique premise, clever presentation, and funny writing. Those elements all work in its favor, but the longer it goes on, the duller it gets. ***– Joe Juba***

Water Locus

8 Fell Seal: Arbiter's Mark

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • PC **Release** April 30 **Rating** T

Fell Seal: Arbiter's Mark goes all-in on adhering to the nostalgic inspirations of one of the genre greats, Final Fantasy Tactics. As an unabashed tribute to the legendary title, Fell Seal hits all the right buttons in terms of combat and customization, but is held back by repetition and an uninteresting story. ***– Daniel Tack***

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BACK TO ZANARKAND

Final Fantasy X's director reminisces about the game's legacy

by Joe Juba

The Final Fantasy series has a reputation for showcasing the best of what a console can offer. When Final Fantasy VII released on the original PlayStation in 1997, it effectively used the hardware transition to usher in a new era of role-playing games with 3D graphics and cinematic cutscenes. The leap between PlayStation and PlayStation 2 was less drastic visually, but as the first entry on the new hardware, Final Fantasy X led the charge into a new realm of storytelling.

Many things that define Final Fantasy X simply weren't possible in previous installments, even beyond the obvious upgrade in graphical quality. It used 3D environments throughout rather than 2D backdrops in towns and dungeons. It eliminated the divide between the overworld and other locations, giving the world a more vibrant and connected feeling. The implementation of voice acting let players hear the phenomenal cast come to life – even if some people mock the forced laughter from heroes Tidus and Yuna in one scene (which, for context, is explicitly about them forcing laughter). All of these elements might seem like standard parts of Final Fantasy today, but they started with Final Fantasy X.

This entry also represented a strong thematic evolution for the series. In the world of Spira, a current of loss runs through everything. A beast named Sin destroys towns and kills indiscriminately, and summoners must sacrifice their lives to stop Sin and buy a few years of peace – but the creature always returns. On top of that, the characters are also living in the shadows of those who came before them; Yuna wants to live up to her father's example, and Tidus wrestles with how his father failed him. These struggles manifested clearly because the characters could talk and their faces could express more emotion, and the unique mixture of sadness and hope resonated in ways few video game stories had achieved.

That's only scratching the surface. A clever queue-based battle system allowed players to swap allies in or out, and a variety of minigames (including Blitzball, which is basically underwater soccer) added variety to the journey. This combination of fun mechanics was such a hit that Final Fantasy X spawned the first direct sequel in the franchise – and some fans are still hoping for another one. Regardless of what the future holds, the past is clear: Final Fantasy X is a landmark RPG. We recently talked to game director Yoshinori Kitase to get some behind-the-scenes insight about this classic.

In the early phases of the Final Fantasy X project, what were the goals that guided the team?
Since each installment from Final Fantasy VII, Final Fantasy VIII and on were depicting an increasingly Western and futuristic world, [Kazushige] Nojima, our scenario-writer, suggested for us to illustrate a world that had a stronger Asian flavor with our new title. The idea to create a fantasy world based on cultures and customs familiar to us felt really new at the time, and I do believe that we succeeded in doing so.

Final Fantasy X was the series' first entry on PS2, which made voice acting possible. How did that change your approach to creating the game?

Up until that point, the dialogues that the scenario writer created were implemented straight into the game. However, with the addition of voice recording, voice actors and their own creativity were also added into the mix. Their acting brought adjustments and improvements to the dialogue, making the characters livelier than ever before. That chemistry was a welcoming surprise to us, as we did not anticipate for it to happen at the time.

The "laughing scene" has become an infamous part of the game. How did you feel about players' reaction to it?
Even in the real world, actions taken by two people in a budding romance are generally embarrassing memories when you look back on them. I believe that this scene depicts that mental state very well. This scene of course is still made fun of by fans, but I imagine that it is because it greatly touched "something" in everyone's heart for it to be such a memorable scene even after 18 years.

Before the game released, did you think Blitzball would be a divisive part of the experience?
No, we did not imagine this reaction. Blitzball was something that I pretty much created on my own (half of it was for my own enjoyment as well). This was because we originally did not plan for it to be something that was necessary to play in order to progress the story, but to keep it as an optional

feature (where only the players that wanted to play would take a detour and play, like the secret minigame "15 Puzzle" in the original Final Fantasy). However, Blitzball eventually became a mandatory route for the story, and the game was changed so that you needed to play Blitzball to obtain a powerful weapon. I do feel sorry to have made some fans suffer because of this, but it would be appreciated if you can regard it as a characteristic of games from that era.

Do you regret how difficult the lightning-dodging and chocobo-racing minigames were for players hoping to get the ultimate weapons? Were you able to complete them yourself?
The developers in charge of those minigames did of course clear them. I personally cleared the lightning-dodge, but… (cough, cough). As a game from that era, I don't regret it. But, for example, if I were to recreate it today, I might think through them a little more.

Can you think of anything that ended up cut that you still wish could have been included in the final game?
The original plotline had you play the opening Zanarkand scene for much longer. If we had gone with this plan, you may have experienced a world slightly similar to Final Fantasy VII a bit more before getting sent to Spira.

Final Fantasy X has a vein of sadness running through it, with a lot of destruction and loss. Were you ever concerned during development that it would be too heavy?
We did not imagine how strongly the emotions of the story would reach our fans, with the implementation of full 3D graphics and voices for the characters. It was also the first time that I shed tears with my own game during development. At the same time, I had the feeling that games were evolving as a media to tell stories and dramas, so I was not worried at all.

Do you think Jecht and Tidus got along any better on the Farplane?
Since a father can also be seen as a rival figure for young boys, they were probably still the same even in the Farplane.

Do you ever look back in amazement on how quickly the Final Fantasy games released? Between 1999 and 2003, a new Final Fantasy came out each year (VIII, XI, X, XI, and X-2). How did that happen?
Yes. I truly am surprised that we finished developing a game in one year with a team of less than 100 people. It is most likely impossible to shorten the development time of any games at the same volume as Final Fantasy that much nowadays, no matter how many people you place on that project. It is a production flow that we can no longer return to as we now create 3D CG games, which utilize a production process that is as massive and sophisticated as film production. As such, we need much more time during the early designing phases of the project.

Back then, there were times when we started to develop when we hadn't even fully fleshed out the game design. For instance, the scenario for the world after the catastrophe in Final Fantasy VI was not ready even when we had already progressed quite a bit into the development of the game.

Without committing to anything officially, how much excitement or discussion is present internally at Square Enix regarding a possible Final Fantasy X-3?
The idea comes up from time to time when a few close people that had worked on the original Final Fantasy X talk with each other. However, it is merely standard chitchat and there have been no movements to realize it because, once the project begins, there is no doubt that it would become a massive project with hundreds of staff working on it (and I have an on-going project that I need to finish before then!). ◈

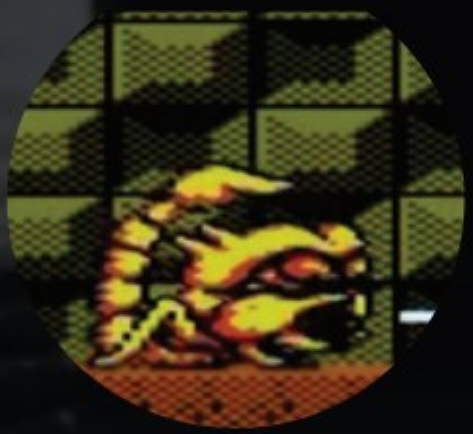
Final Fantasy X/X-2 Remaster recently released on Switch and Xbox One. It is also available on PS4, PS3, Vita, and PC.

The Weirdest Moments From
STAR WARS
Video Games

With the arrival of the new films in 2015, the lore of Star Wars' expanded universe was put to pasture. In some cases, that was a bummer, but for the instances below, it was a blessing. Thankfully, many of these were never considered canon to begin with, but it doesn't change the fact that these weird things happened. ***by Kyle Hilliard***

+ In **Super Empire Strikes Back**, Han Solo fights the Carbon Freezing Chamber Generator in a boss battle and wins! But still gets frozen.

+ In the 1987 Japanese game, **Star Wars**, while rescuing R2-D2, Luke Skywalker fights Sasori Vader, a giant shapeshifting scorpion who takes on the form of Vader.

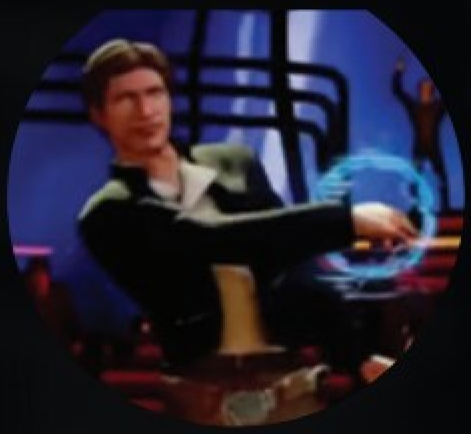


+ Boba Fett enters a deadly car fighting competition with only his jetpack in **Star Wars Demolition**.

+ In **The Force Unleashed II**, a clone of a clone of Darth Vader's secret apprentice, Starkiller, battles and kills Chewbacca, Han Solo, and Princess Leia, who is a lightsaber-wielding Jedi.

+ It is revealed that the iconic symbol for Princess Leia's Rebel Alliance was the family crest of Darth Vader's secret apprentice, Starkiller, in **The Force Unleashed**.

+ Han Solo danced to a parody of Jason Derulo's "Ridin' Solo" called "I'm Han Solo" in **Star Wars Kinect's** dance mode.



+ Alliance General Carlist Rieekan has a modified 1968 Buick Electra Rage in **Rogue Squadron** that he calls, "a relic from a galaxy far, far away," that is space-battle ready.

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